Expanding Role of University Department Secretaries: Potential Middle Managers in the Making

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Abstract
In Taiwan, the plummeting birthrate has further driven the need for drastic changes within universities. Currently, university enrollments are at an all-time low, while also suffering from an increasing number of dropouts. In effect, many graduate programs are rethinking and realigning their program priorities. These strategic changes have actually opened up opportunities in harnessing the untapped potentials of university department secretaries. Within organizational behavior theories, employees' organizational citizenship behavior is highly affected by their role definition. To better understand these issues, the current presentation shall summarize the findings with regards to the expanding role of university department secretaries in Taiwan. A total of 20 university department secretaries were strategically selected and interviewed. Semi-structured interviews included the depth and scope of their responsibilities, together with the insights into their contribution and potential role within the organization. Interview data were transcribed and repeating themes organized and categorized. Findings show that majority of the secretaries have been connected with their programs for more than 10 years and has already surpassed several management terms. More important, almost half of the interviewed secretaries are alumni of the university and are graduate degree holders. Specific themes generated are career developmental plan, training focus on specific career tracks, and increased opportunities for career growth. Lastly, the role of secretaries can also serve as a buffering effect between the faculty and students. It is hoped that by expanding the role of department secretaries, increased in organizational citizenship behaviors can spill over to the student population and promotes retention.

Keywords: Higher Education, Career Development, Buffering Effect, Human Resource Development, Employee Training

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Introduction

For the past ten years, Taiwan higher education institutions are suffering from the problematic decreased in numbers of incoming students (Kuo, 2016; Tran, 2017). Currently, the ministry of education predicted that the number of new freshmen students will have a 40 percent dropped by the year 2028 (Fulco, 2018). Furthermore, a more severe projection is that by 2023 (in just two years from now), around 40 of Taiwan's 101 private universities and 12 of the 51 national institutions would either close down or merge together (Green, 2020). This continued shrinkage of Taiwan higher education has promoted the ***competition*** between universities (Grentzer, 2017), at the same time hastened the need for institutional change (Chang, 2019).

Besides the decline in numbers of incoming new students and strategic shrinkage of universities, Taiwan institutions are also suffering from increased numbers of dropouts. Tsai (2020) reported that according to the Taiwan Ministry of Education (MOE) the percentage of college dropouts increased from 4.63 percent in 2000 to 11.06 percent (or around 90,000 students) in 2017. Upon further investigation, among the 90,000 dropouts almost one-third (28.4 percent) of the students claimed that they are not interested with their studies (Tsai, 2020). While some reports mentioned that student dropouts are due to the rigid teaching methods in universities and the presumption that getting good grades would translate to future career success (Yang, 2017). Furthermore, during the last academic year alone, the MOE reported that the dropout rate was a record high of 13.38 percent (this is around 166,562 students of the total 1.24 million university students) with 19,000 students claiming the ***lack of interest*** as the main reason for leaving the school (Lin et al., 2020). For these reasons, many course programs are rethinking and realigning their program priorities, and adjust to the need of the students.

In anticipation for the decreasing number of incoming freshmen students and the changing student needs, many universities have started to restructure their degree programs (Ching, 2020). However, within any institutional restructuring or change, stress always occurs (Smollan, 2017). These work related stress within higher education institutions are said to be remedied by effective communication, better training, and careful selection of management (Mark & Smith, 2018). Within the university structure, the department secretaries (and staff) are actually a crucial part of the institutional governance (Strike, 2019), which is largely neglected. Within organizational change, department staff and secretaries are actually among the most affected individuals within the school. In reality, university secretaries is an important part of the organizational structure (Liu & Yu, 2017; Strike, 2019). Hence, it would be high time to actually open up opportunities in harnessing the ***untapped potentials*** of university department secretaries within the current age of change.

Within organizational behavior theories, employees' organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) is highly affected by their role definition (Morrison, 1994). With this having said, the current presentation shall summarize the findings with regards to the expanding role of university department secretaries in Taiwan. Focus shall be made within the scope of their responsibilities, together with the insights into their contribution and potential role within the organization. It is hoped that by expanding the role of department secretaries, increased in OCBs can spill over to the student population and promotes retention. Furthermore, implications of the current findings

can also provide university human resource managers and administrators valuable insights into the potential career developments within the department staff and secretaries.

Occupational Stress within the University

Occupational stress within university staff and secretaries is a research topic that is fast gaining popularity. As mentioned previously, occupational stress or work related stresses are much more evident during times of organizational change (Smollan, 2017). Early studies have shown that stress are much reflected on employees' level of job satisfaction and performance, in other words, when employees are under *high* levels stress their job satisfaction levels are at the *lowest* (Winefield & Jarrett 2001). Furthermore, Winefield and Jarett (2001) extrapolated that the cause of work stress in universities are much related to the financial issues and changes within institutions, such as *funding cuts* that led to problems within the day to day operations and educational activities. In addition, the lack of appropriate number of staff to handle the needs of the students (low staff-student ratio), would also result in over work and fatigue (Winefield et al., 2003).

Studies have also shown that the actual relationship between the department secretaries and department administrators (superiors) are highly correlated with their levels of psychological distress (Biron et al., 2008), denoting the need for appropriate *positive interactions* between administrators and staff. In addition, besides the negative correlational relationship between work related stress and university employee's sense of job satisfaction, additional work brought about by downsizing and financial difficulties of institutions are also one of the persistent causes of job pressure (Love et al., 2010). While, high university workloads can increase the chance of job strain and *withdrawal behaviors* of school employees (Taris et al., 2001). Furthermore, research studies have also noted that besides the pressure caused by job demands, *work-family conflict* is also proven to be a significant predictor of stress (Winefield et al., 2014). To summarized, studies have all noted that strategic changes caused by financial difficulties as the main reason for university employees' work related stress and should not be left unattended.

To remedy the inevitable work related stress, many researchers have suggested various concepts and ideas with respect to coping strategies (Williams et al., 2017). Early studies noted the importance of the nature and type of the interaction university staff are involved with (Rose et al., 1998). These interactions in terms of *positive communication strategies* (Mark & Smith, 2018), *increased participation in decision making* (Biron et al., 2008), and *job and career enhancements* (Abouserie, 1996; Tan, 2017; Thongdee & Wattananonsakul, 2016) are seen as important coping strategies that are quite useful in uplifting the overall work experience of department secretaries and staff. Furthermore, focus group interviews with Australian university staff have suggested that the *support* from peers, *recognition and achievement, high morale*, and *flexible working conditions* as positive coping strategies that help in reducing work related stress (Gillespie et al., 2001). In sum, work related stress for university secretaries and staff is an important research area wherein conditions can be made better to enhance the overall work experience.

Organizational Citizenship Behavior and Role Definition

Studies within occupational stress of university staff and secretaries have noted that *role conflict* or *role ambiguity* as an important source of stress (Ahsan et al., 2009). However, these role conflicts if incorporated by a high level of positive organizational support can actually help reduce work related distress (Jawahar et al., 2007) and promote employees engagement (Alday, 2020; Hu et al., 2017). Furthermore, studies have also noted that these perceived organizational supports are also helping the promotion of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) (Shaheen et al., 2016; Singh & Singh, 2010).

The concept of OCB is nothing new. Organ et al. (2005) defined OCB as the *individual behavior that is discretionary, not directly or explicitly recognized by the formal reward system, and in the aggregate promotes the efficient and effective functioning of the organization* (p. 8). This suggests that an OCB is not driven by getting a reward (Ryan, 2002), but rather more related to the individual's personality (Organ, 1994). A sense of *proactive* behavior that promotes a positive sense of satisfaction (Li et al., 2010). At the same time, OCB also tends to enhance the overall *organizational commitment* of the employees (Besharat & Pourbohlool, 2014). More important, for some instances OCB is able to minimize the tendency to commit counterproductive work behaviors (Ching et al., 2017; Hu et al., 2015, 2017).

OCB is said to be measured by observing personality qualities of individuals (Elanain, 2007; Neuman & Kickul, 1998). Lo and Ramayah (2009) used four personality behaviors to determine the OCB of individuals, such as: *civic virtue*, *conscientiousness*, *altruism*, and *courtesy*. On the other hand, Farooqui (2012) proposed five factors describing OCB behaviors, namely: *leadership*, *role characteristics*, *workplace relationships*, *organizational system*, and *job characteristics*. Besides these characteristics, the notion of *sportsmanship* behavior is also seen as a crucial indicator for OCB (Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997). While some incorporated *prosocial actions* and thoughts (Penner et al., 1997), *humility* (Bourdage et al., 2012), and *desire to help* co-workers (Finkelstein & Penner, 2004) as other indicators of OCB. In general, OCB is a complex and evolving concepts (Ocampo et al., 2018), and there are many behavioral traits that can be related, nonetheless, antecedents in promotion of OCB behaviors are also important. One such important antecedent is the clarification of **role identities** (Finkelstein & Penner, 2004; Love et al., 2010; Morrison, 1994).

Methodology

Literature suggests that within organizational behavior theories, employees' OCB is highly affected by their role definition. Moreover, role definitions are highly dependent on career development (Hoekstra, 2011; Schein, 1996). To better understand these issues, the current presentation shall summarize the findings with regards to the expanding role of university department secretaries in Taiwan. The study is designed as a qualitative format, wherein information is collected with the use of semi-structured individual interviews (Maxwell, 2009). A total of 20 university department graduate program secretaries were strategically selected and interviewed. Semi-structured interviews included the *depth and scope of their responsibilities*, together with the *insights into their contribution* and *potential role within the*

organization. Interviews were held in the participants' choice of location and informed consent was signed. Each interview session lasted from one to two hours. Sessions were conducted with the use of the Mandarin Chinese language and consent to audio-record. After the interview sessions, data were transcribed while carefully noting recurrent themes related to topic of discussion (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

Participants of the study were 20 university department graduate program secretaries. With average years of service of almost 12 years, denoting that the participants are quite knowledgeable with regards to the inner workings of the university. More important, many of the participants (7 participants) are actually alumni of the school, denoting a perceived higher sense of organizational commitment (Borden et al., 2014). As for the educational attainment of the participants, 50 percent or half of them have a masters' degree or higher, while twelve (12) of them are working in a national university and the remaining eight (8) are employed by the private sector. Moreover, most university secretaries are female as denoted by only 1 male respondent. Lastly, half of the participants are working in a science related course department and the other half in a social science (non-science) field of study. Table 1 shows the detailed figures of the background demographics.

Table 1. *Background demographics of the participants (N=20)*

	n	*%*	Min.	Max.	*Mean*	*SD*
Years of service			1	37	13.05	11.61
Gender						
Female	19	95				
Male	1	5				
Educational level						
Undergraduate	10	50				
Master	10	50				
Alumni						
Yes	7	35				
No	13	65				
Institution type						
Public (national)	12	60				
Private	8	40				
Field						
Science	10	50				
Non-science	10	50				

Results and Discussions

As mentioned earlier after the interview data were transcribed, repeating themes were also organized and categorized. Within the specific *depth and scope of university secretaries' role*, participants all noted several responsibilities that are quite common and standard. These are the ability to *support the administration* in terms of policy implementations, *management of the meeting agendas* and minutes, assistance with the *quality assurance* processes, handling of the *student enrolment* (selection) procedures, and the taking care of the day to day teaching and learning activities. Furthermore, more specific themes generated are *career developmental plan*, *training focus on specific career tracks*, and *increased opportunities for career growth*. Besides these three themes, two added findings are the current predicament facing

graduate course programs and the potential expanded role of department secretaries within the university.

For the **career development plan**, most of the participants mentioned the university should have an overall professional career plan for the department secretaries. During the interview, many noted the need to have a sort of option for university secretaries to have the opportunity to *take up further studies*. Many participants who are already graduate degree holders all noted the opportunity to take up graduate studies as an important *career achievement*. Furthermore, participants also mentioned that there are many courses that they are quite interested with; such *interdisciplinary learning opportunities* can help secretaries widen and broaden their skills and competencies. In essence, participants are hopeful that university human resource department (HRD) would be able to provide a certain policy (such as *career promotion tracks*) that enables secretaries to further their career, may it be graduate degrees or other competencies or skills.

For the **training focus on specific career tracks**, further investigation of what other skills or competencies the secretaries are interested with, which resulted with mostly information technology related topics. These are information technology productivity knowhow, such as how to further their skills with the use of Microsoft office software, basic computer troubleshooting, and how to maintain (or enhance) the department's webpage. In addition, participants also noted the need for understanding how big data can help with their work and how such data can be visualized effectively. Furthermore, insights on how to manage the department's social media (Facebook, Instagram, and many others) or how can social media help or create more student enrolments. Besides these information technologies related issues, participants also mentioned the need to understand project management, simple statistics, and some information regarding on how to positively interact with the students.

Results indicated that department secretaries are actually quite concern with their work performance with all of the previous mentioned competencies and skills are all *work related*. Participants are truly interested with increasing their competitive advantages in order to further assist their work within the university. The researchers believed that majority of the participants are quite committed to their work. More important, there seems to be no specific difference between national (public) and private institutions or between the science or non-science departments (course programs).

As for the **increased opportunities for career growth**, besides the previous mentioned career advancement and competency building, participants also noted that work *burnout* can be prevented or minimized by *time out from work* and more important the need for *job rotation*. The concept of job rotation has long been used to address employees' job burnout (Hsieh & Chao, 2004). Participants noted that job rotations can be within the department itself (rotating job responsibilities) or even rotation within the college or university.

Table 2. *Specific themes and sub-themes*

Career developmental plan	Specific career tracks	Career growth opportunities
Further studies	Information technology	Job rotation
Interdisciplinary learning	Educational technology	Inter-department rotation
Career promotion track	Project management	
	Statistical data analysis	
	Data visualization	
	Webpage	
	Big data	
	Social media management	
	Counselling	
	Interpersonal skills	

As mentioned, besides these three themes, two added findings are the *current predicament facing graduate course programs* and the *potential expanded role of department secretaries* within the university. During the course of the interviews, participants also mentioned several issues with regards to their graduate programs. More specifically, the *problems with enrolments and dropouts* are still the majority of their concern. Several antecedents are noted such as the current low birth-rate situation within Taiwan, the lack of learning motivation by the students themselves (low in engagement), insufficient educational resources, the need for additional industry cooperation, and the current societal perception on doctoral students, as some of the issues related to student dropouts and difficulties in student recruitment.

As for the potential growth or expansion of role for department secretaries, many participants mentioned that they also aspired to *transition to an academic* (teaching) *related position* or lecturer. This is actually one of the major reasons why participants are pursuing further education, few even mentioned if given the opportunity they are willing to take up a doctoral degree. Lastly, many department secretaries mentioned the need for them to interact with their students in a way quite similar to *counselling*. Participants noted that there are many instances that students have some problems may it be personal, financial, course related, or some minor issues with their mentors or teachers; the role of the secretaries now is to try to understand and clarify the predicaments, since students tends to divulge more information with them. Hence, department secretaries have the opportunity to act as a bridge or provide a sort of buffering effect between the students and faculty.

Conclusion

In sum, the current study summarizes the various findings of the qualitative insights into the career and future opportunities of university secretaries. Findings show that majority of the secretaries have been connected with their programs for more than 10 years and has already surpassed several management terms. More important, almost half of the interviewed secretaries are alumni of the university and are graduate degree holders. Findings also suggests that participants are willing to expand their competency and skills to further help with their responsibilities, hence are quite high with organizational commitment. Furthermore, role definition should be clear and consistent with the possibility of future advancement. Lastly, the role of secretaries

can also serve as a *buffering effect* between the faculty and students. Buffering effect to help students relay information to their faculty (or vice versa), hence minimized misunderstanding and help promote positive interactions. It is hoped that by expanding the role of department secretaries, increased in OCBs can spill over to the student population and promotes retention.

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