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**A COMPARISON OF COHORT AND NON-COHORT
GRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS OF THE
ETHICAL CLIMATE AND ITS IMPORTANCE
IN RETENTION**

LAURA E. SCHULTE, PH.D.
University of Nebraska at Omaha

ABSTRACT

This quantitative study compared 19 cohort and 27 non-cohort graduate students' perceptions of the ethical climate of an educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university using the Ethical Climate Index (ECI). In addition, the study investigated graduate student perceptions of the importance of the ethical climate in the retention of students within academic programs. The results of the study indicated that cohort students rated the ethical climate significantly more positive than non-cohort students on two of the three ECI subscales: *student to faculty* and *student to student*. Both cohort and non-cohort students perceived the ethical climate as an important factor in the retention of students within academic programs.

Graduate student cohort groups were used in educational administration preparation programs as early as the 1950s and saw a resurgence in the 1980s (Achilles, 1994). "A cohort consists of 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). In a recent study of 223 university educational administration programs, Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris (2000) found that 63 percent used graduate student cohort groups in their preparation programs.

Some of the reported benefits of graduate student cohort groups include positive student interactions and relationships, a sense of community and affiliation, and a strong student support system (Barnett et al., 2000; Bratlien, Genzer, Hoyle, &

Oates, 1992; Hill, 1995; Kasten, 1992; Norris, Barnett, Basom, & Yerkes, 1996; Teitel, 1997). All of these factors are critical in the retention of students in academic programs (Weblage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko, & Fernandez, 1989) and provide graduate students with the motivation to complete an academic program (Burnett, 1999; Kasten, 1992; Norris et al., 1996; Witte & James, 1998). The graduate students in cohort groups at one university had higher retention and graduation rates than the traditional graduate students across racial/ethnic groups (Cunningham, 1996).

There are a limited number of empirical studies of graduate student cohort groups in educational administration programs. Those that exist are descriptive and qualitative in nature (Barnett et al., 2000; Bratlien et al., 1992; Hill, 1995; Kasten, 1992; Norris et al., 1996; Teitel, 1997). The purposes of this quantitative study are 1) to compare cohort and non-cohort graduate student perceptions of the ethical climate of an educational administration program at one university and 2) to determine the perceived importance of the ethical climate in the retention of students within an educational administration program. Comparing cohort and non-cohort graduate student perceptions within one program provides the opportunity to control for university, course requirement, and instructor effects. This study is a follow-up to a previous study that investigated graduate faculty and student perceptions of the ethical climate within the College of Education at the same midwestern metropolitan university used in this study (Schulte, 2001).

ETHICAL CLIMATE

For the purposes of this study the ethical climate is defined as the application of five ethical principles, respect for autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, and fidelity, within faculty to student, student to faculty, and student to student interactions and relationships (Brown & Krager, 1985; Kitchener, 1984, 1985). Respect for autonomy refers to respecting an individual's right to make his or her own decisions; nonmaleficence refers to doing no harm to others; beneficence requires one to benefit others; justice means to treat others fairly; and fidelity refers to being loyal and trustworthy. The reported benefits of graduate student cohort groups, such as positive student interactions and relationships, a sense of community and affiliation, and a strong student support system, are components of a positive ethical climate.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were addressed during this study: 1) Is there a difference between cohort and non-cohort graduate student perceptions of the ethical climate of an educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university? 2) Is there a difference between cohort and non-cohort graduate

student perceptions of the importance of the ethical climate in the retention of students within an educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university?

METHOD

Design and Subjects

The study used a survey procedure to collect data from cohort and non-cohort graduate students enrolled in the educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university during the spring and fall semesters of 1999. During the spring semester of 1999, 59 students (39 percent) enrolled in the educational administration program were in cohort groups, and 91 (61 percent) were non-cohort group students. The students were pursuing master or doctoral degrees in educational administration and/or educational administrative endorsements.

The original data were collected in the spring of 1999 at which time 40 Ethical Climate Index (ECI) surveys were distributed, and 30 students responded (9 cohort and 21 non-cohort), providing a return rate of 75 percent (Schulte, 2001). In an attempt to get an adequate number of completed surveys from students in cohort groups, 25 additional ECI surveys were distributed in the fall of 1999. Of those 25 students surveyed, 16 responded (10 cohort, 6 non-cohort), providing a return rate of 64 percent. In total, the ECI survey was distributed to 65 students and 46 responded (19 cohort and 27 non-cohort), providing an overall return rate of 71 percent.

The mean age of the cohort students was 37.44 years ($SD = 10.66$), while the mean age of the non-cohort students was 36.30 years ($SD = 8.56$). The gender breakdown for the cohort group was 74 percent female and 26 percent male, while 63 percent of the non-cohort students were females, and 37 percent were males. Eighty-nine percent of the students in both the cohort and non-cohort groups were enrolled part-time in the educational administration program. Table 1 shows the number of years that the cohort and non-cohort students were enrolled in the educational administration program. All of the students were employed full-time, except for one non-cohort student who was employed part-time.

Procedure

Before the ECI survey was distributed to four educational administration classes during the spring and fall semesters of 1999, the researcher received approval to conduct the study from the chairperson of the educational administration program and the Dean of the College of Education. The ECI survey information included: a) a cover letter that served as informed consent for the students, b) demographic questions, c) the ECI and retention items, and d) a small incentive, a bag of candy (Schulte, 2001).

Table 1. Cohort and Non-Cohort Student Years of Enrollment

Years	Cohort student (%)	Non-cohort student (%)
1 year or less	68.4	63.0
> 1 year, ≤ 2 years	26.3	22.2
> 2 years, ≤ 3 years	0	11.1
More than 4 years	5.3	3.7

The professors from each of the four surveyed classes were contacted to gain their approval before distributing the survey to each class. The researcher distributed the surveys at the beginning of each class period at which time she provided a brief explanation of the survey to the students. She returned the next class period to collect the completed surveys.

Instruments

The 103-item ECI (Schulte, Brown, & Wise, 1991) was used to assess cohort and non-cohort student perceptions of the ethical climate of the educational administration program. The ECI was developed by applying the five ethical principles reported by Kitchener (1984, 1985) to faculty and student interactions and relationships (Brown & Krager, 1985). Students were asked to determine how true the ECI statements were in the educational administration program using a 5-point Likert scale that ranged from "1" Rarely or Never True to "5" Usually or Always True. The ECI has strong psychometric characteristics and can differentiate between faculty and student perceptions of the ethical climate across academic programs (Schulte, 2001; Schulte et al., 1991).

Schulte (2001) divided the 103-item ECI into three subscales by type of interaction: *faculty to student* (number of items = 58), *student to faculty* (number of items = 16), and *student to student* (number of items = 29). Table 2 provides sample items from each of the three subscales. The reliability estimates using Cronbach's alpha for the *faculty to student*, *student to faculty*, and *student to student* subscales are .95, .81, .86, respectively.

Table 3 includes the five items in the retention scale (Schulte, 2001). Students were asked to determine the importance of each item in the retention of students within a graduate academic program using a 5-point Likert scale ranging from "1" Not Important to "5" Very Important. Cronbach's alpha for the retention scale is .75.

Table 2. Sample Items from Each of the ECI Subscales

Faculty to student ECI subscale

Faculty members go out of their way to help students. (beneficence)

Students are given flexibility in choosing courses to fulfill program requirements. (autonomy)

Course exams evaluate students' knowledge of material covered in the course. (justice)

Students can trust faculty members with confidential information. (fidelity)

Faculty members delay student progress through procrastination of their responsibilities. (nonmaleficence)

Student to faculty ECI subscale

Students actively participate in class discussions. (beneficence)

Students accept responsibility for their performance in class by seeking help or information when necessary. (autonomy)

Students act thoughtfully and fairly in the evaluation of professors. (justice)

Students are honest in completing course assignments, exams, papers, or projects. (fidelity)

Students monopolize class time with irrelevant questions and comments. (nonmaleficence)

Student to student ECI subscale

Without being academically dishonest, students share ideas, class notes, and other materials with their peers. (beneficence)

Students feel free to discuss their opinions or beliefs with their peers. (autonomy)

Students' descriptions of their peers' abilities are accurate and fair. (justice)

Students use their peers' ideas as their own. (fidelity)

Students openly question the abilities and competence of their peers. (nonmaleficence)

Note: This table was reproduced from the Schulte (2001) manuscript.

Table 3. Retention Scale

How important do you feel each item is in the retention of students within a graduate academic department or program?

1. A positive ethical climate.
 2. Positive student-student interactions and relationships.
 3. Positive faculty-student interactions and relationships.
 4. Positive student-faculty interactions and relationships.
 5. Positive university-student interactions, such as registering for classes.
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Note: This table was reproduced from the Schulte (2001) manuscript.

Data Analyses

In order to use data from students who did not respond to every ECI item, mean substitution was used to compute student mean scores for each of the ECI subscales (Schulte, 2001). The means generated from the mean substitution process differed from the means generated from the students with no missing values by only .01 ($SE = .13$) (cohort) to .03 ($SE = .12$) (non-cohort) for the *faculty to student* ECI items, .02 ($SE = .09$) (cohort) to .03 ($SE = .10$) (non-cohort) for the *student to faculty* ECI items, and .01 ($SE = .09$) (cohort) to .06 ($SE = .11$) (non-cohort) for the *student to student* ECI items.

The data were analyzed using the SPSS for Windows 8.0 statistical software. Univariate tests were conducted because the researcher wished to investigate differences between cohort and non-cohort groups on each of the three ECI subscales and the retention scale separately. Thus, four independent *t*-tests were conducted using a significance level of .05 for each *t*-test. The independent variable for each of the *t*-tests was group, cohort, or non-cohort. The dependent variables were student mean scores on the retention scale and each of the three ECI subscales: *faculty to student*, *student to faculty*, and *student to student*.

RESULTS

Table 4 provides the means, standard deviations, and results from the independent *t*-tests for each of the ECI subscales and the retention scale for the cohort and non-cohort groups. The results from the independent *t*-tests indicated that the cohort student perceptions of the ethical climate were significantly more positive than the non-cohort student perceptions for the *student to faculty* subscale

Table 4. Means, Standard Deviations, and *t*-Tests between Cohort and Non-Cohort Students on the ECI Subscales and the Retention Scale

Scale	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Faculty to student			1.192	44	.240
Cohort	4.01	.37			
Non-cohort	3.87	.42			
Student to faculty			2.785	44	.008
Cohort	4.13	.27			
Non-cohort	3.85	.37			
Student to student			2.420	44	.020
Cohort	4.04	.26			
Non-cohort	3.78	.41			
Retention			.306	44	.761
Cohort	4.45	.50			
Non-cohort	4.41	.49			

($t(44) = 2.785, p = .008$, two-tailed) and the *student to student* subscale ($t(44) = 2.420, p = .020$, two-tailed). There was no significant difference between cohort and non-cohort student perceptions for the *faculty to student* subscale ($t(44) = 1.192, p = .240$, two-tailed) and the retention scale ($t(44) = .306, p = .761$, two-tailed).

DISCUSSION

Cohort and Non-Cohort Student Perceptions

Cohort student perceptions of the ethical climate were significantly more positive than non-cohort student perceptions for two of the three ECI subscales: *student to faculty* (how students interact with faculty members) and *student to student* (how students interact with other students). The cohort student mean scores for each of the ECI subscales were moderately positive falling between often true (4) and usually or always true (5), while the non-cohort student mean scores for each of the ECI subscales were somewhat positive falling between sometimes true (3) and often true (4) (see Table 4). Both cohort and non-cohort students perceived the ethical climate as important (4) to very important (5) in the retention of students within an academic program (see Table 4).

Differences between Cohort and Non-Cohort Student Perceptions

In order to pinpoint the differences between cohort and non-cohort student perceptions on the *student to faculty* and *student to student* ECI subscales, items with mean differences greater than one-half of a standard deviation between the cohort and non-cohort students were examined. Some examples of items with differences between the cohort and non-cohort students on the *student to faculty* subscale include: students' work shows effort and quality; students act thoughtfully and fairly in the evaluation of professors; students are honest in completing course assignments, exams, papers, or projects; students monopolize class time with irrelevant questions and comments; and faculty members can trust students with confidential information. Some examples of items with differences between the cohort and non-cohort students on the *student to student* subscale include: students feel free to discuss their opinions or beliefs with their peers; there is a cooperative spirit among the students in this department or program; students go out of their way to help their peers; students provide their peers with reinforcement and encouragement when appropriate; students openly belittle the opinions or beliefs of their peers; and students place unreasonable demands on their peers. For each of the items listed above, the cohort student perceptions were more positive than the non-cohort student perceptions.

Faculty Perceptions

Further research needs to be conducted to assess faculty perceptions of the ethical climate of cohort and non-cohort student groups within the same academic program. This study considered only cohort and non-cohort student perceptions of the ethical climate of an academic program. Qualitative research indicates that the power relationships between faculty and students may be different for cohort and non-cohort student groups (Barnett et al., 2000; Teitel, 1997).

In the traditional university setting, the students hold a subordinate position of power when compared to faculty members (Kipnis, 1976). The strong bonds that develop among students as a result of being in a cohort group can change the power structure in students' relationships with faculty members. One faculty member noted that students in cohort groups were more willing to try to negotiate course evaluation and course requirement issues than students in traditional settings (Teitel, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The results of this quantitative study indicate that there is a more positive ethical climate for cohort students when compared to non-cohort students within an educational administration program at a midwestern metropolitan university. Positive student interactions and relationships, a sense of community and

affiliation, and a strong student support system characterize this positive ethical climate. Both cohort and non-cohort students perceived the ethical climate as important to very important in the retention of students within an academic program. Administrators of academic programs should consider the cohort model as an important instructional delivery system because it promotes a positive ethical climate and the retention of students.

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Direct reprint requests to:

Laura E. Schulte, Ph.D.
University of Nebraska at Omaha
Department of Educational Administration and Supervision
Kayser Hall 414
6001 Dodge Street
Omaha, NE 68182-0162