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Teaching Branch Campus Students: Challenges and Opportunities for Educators in Higher Education

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What is a Branch Campus?

- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2006) defines a branch (or regional) campus or institution as "**A campus or site of an educational institution that is not temporary, is located in a community beyond a reasonable commuting distance from its parent institution, and offers full programs of study, not just courses**" (p. G-1).

- Number of **branch campuses may be expanding** even as the use of online and other interactive courses have increased.

- Higher percentage of **nontraditional students** who are place-bound, commute, may be older, and strive to balance multiple responsibilities including work and care for families.

Sources: Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Choy, 2002; Compton, Cox, & Lanaan, 2006; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; Hoyt & Howell, 2012; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Mindrup, 2012; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Wolfe & Strange, 2003.

From the Literature: Opportunities & Challenges

Opportunities:

1. **Working closely with students**
2. **Friendly environment**
3. **Autonomy**
4. Cross-disciplinary **collegiality**
5. **Cooperation** re: student concerns
6. Greater **involvement in change efforts** at campus and in community

Challenges:

1. **Negative perceptions** from parent campus
2. **Professional isolation**
3. **Demands on time and energy**
4. **Limited collegiality across disciplines**

Sources: Bird, 2007; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; McGrath, 2012; Merzer, 2008; Mindrup, 2012; Poling, LoSchiavo, & Shatz, 2009; Wolfe & Strange, 2003

Purpose of Study

- An exploration of the unique **experiences and perceptions of social work educators teaching branch campus students**
  - **Resident** (at the branch campus) **and non-resident faculty**
- Investigated the **perceived advantages and disadvantages of teaching branch campus students**
- **Aim to inform social work (and other higher education) programs re: challenges and opportunities** related to supporting faculty members who teach branch campus students

Methodology: Sampling

- **542 total universities with social work education programs in U.S.**
  - No database of social work education programs at branch campuses
    - Investigation identified **89 branch campus programs**
- **Online survey** distributed to faculty who teach branch campus students
- **81 respondents from 26 states**
  - **60 provided written responses**
    - **37 resident (branch campus) faculty**
    - **23 non-resident faculty**

Methodology: Thematic Analysis

- Thematic analysis was used to identify patterns across the data set of the advantages and disadvantages from both the resident and non-resident faculty of teaching on a branch campus.
- The process of coding took place in six phases. The researchers:
    1) familiarized themselves with the data;
    2) created a grid and generated initial codes;
    3) searched for themes among the codes;
    4) reviewed and defined the themes:
    5) named the themes; and
    6) reported out the final themes to each other.
- This approach best emphasizes the perceptions of the survey participants and captures their experiences as faculty members at branch campus social work programs.

Themes: Advantages

Resident Faculty

Autonomy & Ownership of Program
Supportive Environment
Connection to Students
Location/Close to Home
Removed from University Politics
Smaller Setting
Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Collaboration
Meeting Needs of Underserved Students
Students with Diversity of Life Experience
Motivated Students

Non-resident Faculty

Connection to Students
Students with Diversity of Life Experience
Motivated Students
Location/Close to Home
Smaller Setting

Themes: Disadvantages

Resident Faculty

Isolation
Lack of Understanding by Parent Campus
Lack of Resources & Support of Travel
Lack of Collaborative Opportunities
Heavier Workload

Non-resident Faculty

Lack of Resources & Support
Students Unmotivated & Unprepared
Lack of Connection with Students
Travel
Heavier Workload

Major Themes

- ***Connection to Students***
- ***Recognition by the Parent Campus***

- Themes present for both comparison groups (Resident and non-resident) and expressed in both categories (Advantages and disadvantages)

Major Themes: Connection to Students

Resident Faculty
- "Because of smaller cohorts, I get to know each student well."
- "Closer relationships with students."
- "I meet the needs of underserved students."
- "Students are more diverse and have life experience."
- "Very motivated students."
- "Students feel isolated, left out of main campus activities."

Non-Resident Faculty
- "Students are older and have more life experience."
- "Students are too busy to find time for school work."
- "Students are hostile at regional campuses."
- "Students are underprepared for level of work, less professional."
- "Students act entitled, don't feel need to be to class on time, don't read, not hardworking when transferring from an CC."

Major Themes: Recognition by the Parent Campus

Resident Faculty
- "Have more autonomy and ownership of program."
- "Lack of understanding by department in teaching load."
- "Department meetings don't address regional campus discussions/items."
- "Feel disconnected from communication given at main, and from colleagues."
- "Lack of collaboration opportunities but same research expectations."

Non-Resident Faculty
- "University meets needs of underserved students."
- "Lack of resources and support for faculty (advising, technology, supplies)."
- "Lack of interaction with other department faculty."
- "Additional work load for those who have other university responsibilities."
- "Additional work load for those who have other university responsibilities."

Discussion

- *The broader systemic problems* identified by faculty teaching at a branch campus can inform institutions on tailoring policies, procedures and resources that may better foster a supportive culture that values branch campus faculty.

- C*ultivating more opportunities for collaboration* between parent and branch campus faculty to foster a better understanding of the workload and ameliorate feelings of isolation may enhance branch campus faculty job satisfaction.

- Institutions that *develop a comprehensive menu* of faculty developmental offerings can help to build a faculty who can weather challenges and offer creative solutions (Wolfe & Strange, 2003).

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