

## Professors' Perspectives on Educational Cohorts

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**Abstract:** Cohort educational models (CEM) are used to support students in graduate degree completion. Studies around CEMs focus mainly on student benefits. Voices of professors who organize and ultimately teach educational cohorts have been missing from this dialog. This study seeks to uncover professors' perspectives on CEMs.

The study examines professors' perspectives on the cohort educational model (CEM). A cohort is a group of students bound together by a program of study that takes the majority of coursework together (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Miller & Irby, 1999; Potthoff, Fredrickson, Batenhorst, & Tracy, 2001). To increase degree completion success rates, CEMs in higher education are placing students in groups, moving them through coursework together (Barnett & Cafarella, 1992).

Rubin and Rubin (2005) state that "finding a topic means paying attention to ordinary events and then asking which of these interests you the most" (p. 43). This is exactly what I did with my topic. I thought of an ordinary event, taking classes within a cohort, and then began asking myself what about that topic interested me the most. This occurred as a result my two years of being in a doctoral cohort. I was fortunate to meet another student outside of the cohort pursuing the same degree. Based on our discussions, I realized that my doctoral experience and hers were very different in many ways. It seemed like she was floating and drifting in academia more than I was. This experience made me curious about the CEM; I wondered if students outside of the model had different experiences.

The past summer, I took a class with a cohort in which I was not a part. I remember feeling somewhat envious and left out of the intimate relationships that they seemed to share. I wondered if this was what my friend on the outside of our cohort felt. Looking at the different perspectives of students within and outside of the cohort would have to include other students. I decided to call my friend who was not in our cohort and find out if she would like to study the CEM from these multiple perspectives. She liked the idea and agreed to participate if we could get the approval.

Later on that same evening, with the guidance and probing questions of my professor, I asked myself the question, what do the professors think of the CEM? As a result of enthusiasm from my student colleagues to participate in the study of the CEM and the generous support of our professor, we were able to create a mini-study on this model from multiple perspectives using grounded theory. According to Rubin & Rubin (2005) grounded theory consists of themes and concepts emerging "from the data without the use of the literature" (p. 222). The purpose of my part of the mini-study was to uncover professors' perspectives on the CEM. The main research question addressed was, "What are professors' perspectives on the CEM for graduate programs?"

### Method

The participants in this mini-study included three professors from the College of Education at a large urban university. All of the professors taught at the graduate or undergraduate levels and had experiences in the K-12 public school system at some time in their careers. The setting of the study was mostly in the College of Education offices, and one

participant agreed to do an interview in their home. All of the professors had both participated in CEMs as students and taught CEMs as professors.

The data was gathered via IRB pre-approved interview protocol guide. The interviews were conducted one-on-one and recorded with an audio-cassette recording device (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). “The one-on-one interview is a data collection process in which the researcher asks questions and records the answers from only one participant in the study at a time” (Creswell, 2005, p. 215). After taping the interview, I transcribed the interviews and then coded them for themes. “Transcripts are the main data of many interview studies” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 129).

The coding style I used to analyze the transcripts followed the grounded theory approach that involves looking for emerging themes and concepts without using literature (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). I used open coding, which requires “coding as you go along” (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 222). This type of coding consists of creating a category list in order to sort through the data, which is a critical step in the analysis of the data (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). I devised two category coding system for the transcripts: (a) benefits of CEMs and (b) challenges of CEMs. To increase validity member checking was used. Member checking requires researchers to ask their participants to provide feedback on the interpretation of the data (Merriam, 2002). In addition to member checking, peer review was used. Peer review employs other student colleagues to read and review the research to ensure validity and reliability (Merriam, 2002). In my case, I requested two other doctoral students to peer review my work. To preserve confidentiality, the name of the university is omitted and each faculty is given a pseudonym.

### **Findings**

Data analysis revealed two major themes: benefits and challenges.

#### *Benefits*

The benefit theme included the following sub-themes: (a) the cohort as an entity, (b) relationships in cohorts, (c) supports for culturally and linguistically diverse students and non-traditional learners, and (d) professor reflections on students and faculty dealing with a CEM. Cohorts often tend to function as one entity that develops “its own personality” (Wesson, Holman, Holman, & Cox, 1996, p. 16). Contributing to the cohort operating in this capacity is the idea of group cohesion (Festinger, 1950), which is the culmination of all elements causing members to maintain group membership (as cited in Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Radin and Feld (1985) define a group as a collective of individuals that exhibit these four characteristics:

(a) The individuals engage in face to face interaction; (b) there are few enough of them to notice an absence; (c) they are interdependent, that is, they need one another to attain their own goals; and (d) they perceive themselves as a group. (p. 50)

The final two characteristics of interdependence and group perception convey the concept that the group exists as one unit (Radin & Feld, 1985). This reflects the first sub-theme of the cohort as an entity. Dr. S speaks of her personal experience of unity and being in a cohort in her undergraduate degree:

I was with a very tightly knit group of dedicated faculty and students who wanted to prove that successfully passing all the classes ... You learned to work and take classes with and from literally intensive study groups where we studied in the library together....

Often times, because of the social dynamics at work in a cohort, “the cohort will develop a ‘collective voice’ that is significantly more powerful than a classroom made up of individual voices” (Potthoff et al., 2001, p. 40). Dr. S spoke about this phenomenon in regard to an instructor that her cohort felt was inappropriate on racial issues in the classroom. Her cohort was

able to effect changes with regard to the professor who said inappropriate racial statements by using their collective voice.

The second sub-theme of relationship building and group development are non-linear processes that evolve over time (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Each professor alluded to the development of a personality unique to each CEM they encountered. Dr F comments:

...you just feel that each cohort kinda has a different personality. I've had groups that just seem to be better cohorts than others. I don't know if it's the quality of the students of the group, or the way that they form their thoughts, or just ya know left it to not, it's almost like each produces a different personality. Each cohort takes on its own personality, well then of course within each cohort you have students that are stronger than others.

Describing the same experience, Dr. P states:

Because the cohort is so strong, it's like they feed off each other; it's like sometimes if you're not even there it would probably be okay because they would just go. Like they have a rhythm about them and you would have to just jump in and see where you fit.

Like the collective voice, abilities of students to develop relationships in cohorts may be influenced by their cultural identity and ability to negotiate cultures that may vary from their own. The third sub-theme of supports for culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) students and non-traditional learners is illustrated by two of the professors interviewed. They indicated that they believed that CEMs afforded non-traditional and CLD students supports that traditional educational models did not offer. Dr. X said that non-traditional students are "people who are going back to school after a few years you know....The typical college student is not what it was twenty years ago, and that's why I think we need different approaches." Typical college students are recent high school graduates, whereas the non-traditional student is characterized as a student who may be working full time with a family. CLD students differ from the "predominant European American, middle-class, 'mainstream' culture" (Omrod, 2006, p. 105) in that they may originate from a different country, speak a language other than English, or be in a different socio-economic class (Omrod, 2006). Dr. F discussed how the CEM provides emotional and physical supports by stating:

Ya know, saying, "*Stay in there, it's gonna be okay.*" I know some of our people will watch each others' children when they work on assignments. Or they'll get together and help each other, ya know give them a ride, if their car is broken down. Ya know, all of these things, when you have students that are at risk for not being a typical college student who could more easily stay in the program.

Although educational prospects for CLD students have broadened over the years (Kelly & Prescott, 2007) and more undergraduate degrees have been awarded to minority students, graduate programs have not seen the same upswing in numbers for these students (Ulloa & Herrera, 2006). There exists no one reason for this disproportionality. Some believe that the lack of social integration into academia itself may be partially to blame for this discrepancy (Nettles, 1990; Ulloa & Herrera, 2006). The small percentage of CLD students who overcome the challenges of gaining access to graduate school has to be supported. Research has shown that these students, and most others in graduate education programs, benefit from the CEM in professional collaboration, academic supports, and developing personal relationships with peers (Potthoff et al., 2001; Slater & Trowbridge, 2000; Teitel, 1997).

The fourth sub-theme is professor reflections on students and faculty dealing with a CEM. Professors discussed administrative advantages and the need for team building in CEMs. Dr F states, "I think because they are in a cohort, we might meet them more in groups, in

comparison to someone who's not part of the cohort, that come in one by one to take care of them." Programming and course scheduling are positively affected by the CEM (Barnett et al., 2000). Dr. F states,

And also I think, from a kind of you know, administrative perspective, I think when you have cohorts, people come into your programs, it is easier to manage advising. It's easier to manage getting them services and resources because there all at the same place at the same time, so you can pretty much offer up all kinds of resources.

Dr. S advised professors involved with CEMs to prepare cohorts in advance of starting a CEM with team building exercises. She states:

I think that um if they could prepare cohorts in advance, like before you even take a class like on the first day the emphasis is on getting to know each other um team building activities, which we typically don't do on the first day. We do ice breakers and what's your neighbors that kind of superficial stuff.

### *Challenges*

The two main challenge themes emerged: (a) complexities for students and professors and (b) cohort-within-a-cohort. The first sub-theme includes the difficulties students and faculty have with course scheduling and administrative duties related to the running of a CEM. Dr P describes how hard it was if a student got out of course sequence stating:

One thing that I found in my undergrad program and my doctoral program with a cohort is that there is not a lot of flexibility for people who kind of want to do their own thing. Not if you want to, like, take a different course. For example in my doctoral program, there were courses that I had already taken in my specialist program. I would have had to take them again. I wanted to kind of do an independent study.

Students may be restricted by inflexible course structures which can inhibit program completion (Barnett et al., 2000). The outlook on this type of inflexibility varied on whether it was perceived to affect the student or the professor. Barnett et al. (2000) reported that the CEM may amplify a professor's advisement load and create discord among those who are not involved in the cohort program. Dr. F was the only professor in the study who mentioned the concerns of workload but merely referred to them as a challenge.

Another challenge Dr. P described was the daunting task of teaching a cohort who have already established group norms and relationships. She states,

It's really been difficult dealing with cohorts, especially coming in as an instructor and they're already in established groups. It's that they've already established norms; they've already established a rapport among each other. And you're coming in as *the outsider*. And so again, um it takes time for them to feel you out and for them to accept you as a visitor into their cohort.

While this is seen as a positive for the students in the cohort, those on the outside, like non-cohort students and faculty, may feel somewhat uncomfortable encountering this initially. Barnett and Muse (1993) and Hill (1995) found that students who were not in the cohort felt like they had a lower status than those within the cohort (as cited in Barnett et al., 2000). Issues of race and culture, if not addressed adequately, eat into the heart of a cohort contributing to the development of a cohort-within-a-cohort design. Two of the professors interviewed discussed this challenge. Cohorts generally spend a few years together going through coursework. When the group is diverse, there tends to be a longer time taken to develop a group culture (Toseland & Rivas, 1998). Therefore, the CEM is ideal for diverse student population. However, if the issues of diversity are not addressed, hostilities can simmer below the surface creating larger problems

later on. Wesson et al. (1996) recommends professors to include creating life maps, the use of personal reflections, and exploration of social class via use of autobiography or biography and other methods.

One of the professors expressed concern that many faculty are not aware that they may lack knowledge or experience in addressing cultural diversity. Another faculty member felt that in general, not by any mal-intent but by sheer ignorance, faculty might perpetuate institutional racism due to their ignorance on the matter. Dr. P and Dr. Z shared concerns about the need to develop cultural competence with faculty in higher education. Dr. P offered this perspective:

So, I think it's just something that we don't really address in terms of faculty development because it's so touchy. I think people are just not there yet. And I think it will have to come from administration, we are all starting an examination of where we are in terms of cultural competence whether you're an expert, or whether you're a novice; we are all going to go through this as a faculty because it's important.

Dr. Z spoke about the self-segregation of colleges in the university and the attitudes towards cultural competence, when expressing this perspective:

It's almost like if you don't know that you are not inter-culturally competent, you aren't going to try to become culturally competent. If you don't know what you don't know, you have to have somebody tell you; you have to have a confrontation; you have to have, kind of, even a transformational experience.

### **Results**

Professors discussed the cohort as an entity, recognizing a collective voice. They also noted a powerful presence when they had a cohort in their classes. Recognition of the strength of relationships that are built in cohorts mirrors what has been revealed in the research. Interviewees revealed that they too had experienced some of the same closeness and strong relationships both in and outside of class with the cohorts in which they studied.

Complexities of the CEM for students and professors were characterized by Dr. P who stated that she and students outside of the cohort often initially felt like an outsider in the presence of the cohort. She qualified her statement saying that in the case of the professor, there was a power differential since the professor gave the final grade. Additionally, she stated that the professor can set a tone in the classroom and encourage discussions that enhance relationship building. However, in the case of the student, they are at the mercy of the professor and the cohort to make them feel welcome in the class.

Diversity issues were mentioned by two of the three professors. Both of these professors commented that many faculty may not be aware of their limitations in accepting and facilitating tolerance among students because they themselves may inadvertently perpetuate cultural intolerance. Continued exclusion of certain groups in graduate schools increases student and faculty isolation and disillusionment with academia. This dynamic in the end contributes to the creation of a cohort-within-a-cohort based on race, class, culture, and socio-economic factors.

### **Conclusions**

CEMs are strong mechanisms for supporting all types of students. These models make the lives of professors both easier and more difficult at times. Easier when it comes to tasks such as advising and course planning; harder when it comes to finding dissertation committees and servicing dichotomous groups of students.

Based on the literature review done for this mini-study, there appear to be sparse data on the perceptions of professors regarding the CEM. Additionally, there was very little mention of challenges facing both students and professors when it comes to addressing cultural diversity.

This study has helped shed a new light to CEM, one that has not received much attention but has a direct link to the success of CEM. It is important to continue this research by asking “What do professors perceive can be done to increase the success rate of CLD students in CEMs in graduate programs across the country?”

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