

THE UNIQUE GOVERNANCE CHALLENGES OF GRADUATE CONTRACT-COHORT PROGRAMS

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Employing a cohort model for preparing . . . leaders has tremendous advantages over traditional approaches. Our position is that educators have only begun to understand the value of cohorts for developing leaders and promoting a transformational leadership paradigm based on an understanding of self and others, visionary leadership, and the capacity to create a learning community.

—Basom, Yerkes, Norris, &
Barnett (1996, p. 108)

One of the most significant trends that will affect management education in the 21st century is the relationships that will develop between universities and organizations in the area of employee education.¹ Organizations recognize the importance of graduate management education. One model is for a number of employees to obtain their graduate degrees from various programs of differing quality at universities across the country. A recent and growing trend is for organizations to seek the benefits that come from a group of their employees sharing the same high-quality, graduate-level leadership and management experience. The purpose of this article is to point out challenges in this form of university-corporate partnership both for future research and for other universities that may enter into this type of relationship.² These

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partnerships seem to be increasing, and our experience has been that they represent an excellent way for management education to be conducted. We have found the challenges, however, to be unique and novel compared with any other educational delivery mode.

This special issue on "Challenges and Frontiers for the 21st Century" is devoted to the changing relationship between organization employees and universities. Cohort education, in which students share a common set of classes and experiences, was not common between 1940 and 1980 (Basom et al., 1996, p. 100) but has since been a growing trend. Another trend, with almost no historical precedent, is for organizations to contract with universities for a group of their employees to receive a graduate management education at the same time. The academic community will need to rethink the governance of degree programs in situations in which an organization is a major stakeholder for a given degree program.

No previous academic work was found that studied degree programs that are both contract and cohort. The challenges described in this article were observed or identified as potential issues over a 6-year period in master's degree programs at two universities (The George Washington University and National Louis University), with four different contract organizations (AT&T, The U.S. Air Force, The U.S. Customs Service, The U.S. Navy). These organizations contracted with a university for a cohort of their students to complete the standard master's degree programs already offered by the university.

Programs that are both contract and cohort have issues and challenges that are distinct and unique to the combination of these two characteristics. Two primary characteristics drive the different challenges of graduate-degree, contract-cohort programs. First, a new and important stakeholder emerges—the contract organization. Second, the students in a given employer cohort are extremely cohesive, and there is meaningful cohesion with students in other cohorts of the same contract organization, even when they graduate years apart.

Related Research

Although a literature review of the relevant sources revealed no articles or books discussing the specific topic of this article—the unique governance challenges of graduate contract-cohort programs—some studies have been conducted in related areas and are briefly described here. Preliminary research on cohorts has been conducted with respect to historical uses of

cohorts, significant themes that characterize cohorts, the current state of cohort use, and other areas (Yerkes, Basom, Barnett, & Norris, 1995, p. 8). Studies have also been conducted that discuss the partnership of universities with the public and private sectors. These studies typically focus on aspects of the relationship that go beyond the classroom: the donation of equipment to the university, internships available in organizations, advisory councils, and so on (Bosley, 1995; Lankard, 1995; Nimitz et al., 1996). Other studies have focused on the issues that arise when a college or university is involved with creating a customized program for an employer that does not result in the employees receiving college degrees (U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

One aspect of the subject of this article, cohort learning, has been explored more extensively. The advantages of cohort learning have been well documented (Adams & Hamm, 1990). Peterson et al. (1995) found that the cohort system has “considerable” advantages, including the availability of faculty throughout the year, not just during the quarter or semester in which a specific class is taught. Johnson, Johnson, and Scott (1978) found that cohort learning can improve individual performance, increase self-esteem, and enhance mutual attraction among group members. Cohort learning “stimulates critical thinking, enhances conceptual development, encourages mutual interdependence, and fosters leadership and creative problem-solving skills, as well as interactive social skills, creating a strong bond among group members” (Lynott, 1998, p. 21). Burnett (1989) found that graduate cohort students in education are more likely to graduate and to feel that their academic performance is improved.

Some work has explored the “contract” characteristic of the subject of this article. Researchers have discovered that contract education raises a set of issues when the education is not the standard degree program of a university academic department. A study of California Community Colleges ascertained that quality of customized certificate or training programs can suffer significantly unless the faculty take an active role in curriculum development and approval, full-time faculty are involved in the hiring of part-time faculty who must meet minimum standards, a faculty contract education liaison is appointed, and funds generated are used to improve educational programs (U.S. Department of Education, 1993). Apparently, no work has been done to understand the critical policy issues pertaining to governance when all of the following variables interact—the program is graduate-level and for a degree, a corporation is contracting with the university, and the degree is taken by students as a cohort.

Open Enrollment Dynamics Compared With Contract-Cohort Dynamics

Consider the following stakeholders in the process of an employed student (typically receiving tuition assistance from the employer) obtaining a graduate degree: the student, the employer, the professor, and the university administrator. In a typical open enrollment situation, the following occur:

- The employer has clear authority over the student (for work performance).
- The professor has clear authority over the student (for academic performance).
- The university administrator has clear authority over the student (for admissions decisions, degree continuance, etc.)
- The professors (although sometimes weakly organized) are better organized than the collection of open enrollment students.
- The students have weak connections among themselves.
- The employer asserts virtually no influence on the university.

Putting the characteristics of *contract* together with *cohort* in a graduate management degree program changes the above dynamics in several respects.

- The employer's authority over the student (or at least the manager's) is weakened because the organization has sanctioned the student's participation in the program. The student typically has divided accountability, some to the manager and some to the contract representative.
- The professor's authority over the student is weakened because the students now present a collective front, they have easy access to information about what has happened in a given course in prior years, they have easy access to information about how a given course is administered compared with other courses during a given semester, and they have a contract representative who can advocate on behalf of the student.
- The university administrator's authority over the student is weakened for many of the same reasons; they present a collective front, they have easy access to information about admissions criteria and decisions for other students, and they have a contract representative who can advocate on behalf of the student.
- The contract-cohort students are often better organized than the faculty (see examples below).
- The employer may want some influence on decisions and plans of the university (see examples below).
- The students have incredibly strong connections among themselves (the use of email, for example, has allowed instant dissemination of information to an entire cohort).

The student cohesion occurs because of a number of factors that typically are not present in open enrollment student relationships. Although some of

these factors may be present in noncontract-cohort situations, the dynamics are dramatically different because the students work for the same employer. A brief list of these factors would include the following: that students study together, carpool together, may share living space at least temporarily, socialize together, their spouses and families may form relationships, may have known each other at work for many years, and will likely continue to work together in the future.

Coupling cohort dynamics together with contract dynamics results in a series of challenges that have been organized into three categories: (a) the nature of university and contract organization interactions, (b) the nature of professor-student interactions, and (c) the nature of student-student interactions. Although the following discussion may appear imposing, the reader should not lose sight of that we consider this arrangement to greatly facilitate management education. Other sources describe the advantage of such a format. We would add that most professors in our program strongly prefer to teach courses to these students. The accompanying challenges, which the author surfaced at faculty meetings, in student discussions and in interactions with contract representatives are listed below, followed by brief descriptions of each.

Governance Challenges of Graduate Contract-Cohort Programs

- The nature of university and contract organization interactions
 - dealing with students as a collective
 - equity between contract and open enrollment students
 - excellent employees with inadequate academic records
 - the clash of university and corporate cultures
 - universities performing corporate accountability functions
 - the corporation as a stakeholder of the university
 - collective student clout
 - The nature of professor-student interactions
 - the students out-organize the faculty and administrators
 - students' expectations of faculty experience
 - equity in grading across sections
 - grades used for promotion decisions
 - the university caught between competing interests of the corporation
 - The nature of student-student interactions
 - the cohort as a social system
 - cohort "Cliff Notes"
 - what constitutes individual work in a cohort?
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The Nature of University and Contract Organization Interactions

DEALING WITH STUDENTS AS A COLLECTIVE

The paradigm of the relationship between university and student changes with the insertion of a contract organization. Universities have long traditions of dealing with each student as an individual. For example, universities have strict procedures for releasing transcript information about any student to anyone other than the student without his or her permission. The contract-cohort model creates a group identity, and the university must now sometimes deal with students as a group. The employer, for example, may impose course restrictions on students that are more stringent than the university would require. The student's advisor then must uphold those restrictions. When we are scheduling the briefing about our comprehensive exam, for a second example, we never consult our open enrollment students about their availability, and we make it their responsibility to get the information if they miss the briefing. With a contract-cohort, we do not schedule it without first consulting with the students to ensure there is no work-related conflict.

EQUITY BETWEEN CONTRACT AND OPEN ENROLLMENT STUDENTS

Although a university would certainly like to maintain a contract that is going well, beyond that, the administrators and professors may develop an affinity for the organization and its students. Cohesion develops along these linkages. A disadvantage of this affinity is that open enrollment students may begin to feel like second class citizens. The affinity may also introduce unwanted bias into the grading of comprehensive examinations, admissions decisions, and so on.

EXCELLENT EMPLOYEES WITH INADEQUATE ACADEMIC RECORDS

In many cases, the employer selects employees to be in their academic program based on criteria related to the employees' performance and future career growth. These criteria may differ markedly from the criteria the university uses to determine whether an applicant should be admitted as a degree candidate. For example, the organization may select people based on current job performance. The university uses standard academic indicators such as GPA and GRE or GMAT scores. We have had cases in which a person was in

the top 10% of the organization's employees but in the bottom 10% of the standardized test scores. Moreover, there is an expectation by the contract representative and the students that everyone (or nearly everyone) selected by the employer will be admitted to the degree program.

Consider a borderline applicant who would normally be denied admittance. What if the contract representative calls to inquire whether there is any way the applicant can be admitted? The pressure to admit the student can surface in different places. Perhaps the faculty are willing to admit the student to keep harmonious contract relationships, but the dean's (or admissions) office is not. Or, the administration could be more interested in maintaining the contract and pressure the faculty to admit a student they otherwise would not accept. Other examples, some of which are elaborated later in this article include the following: suggestions from the contract representative to modify the degree program, modify a course design, exceed the maximum course size for a class, allow students to complete course requirements in alternative ways (if work takes them away from school), and so forth. Employers, understandably, are reluctant to turn over hundreds of thousands, or millions of dollars to a university without wanting to have some level of influence on the learning experience of their employees.

THE CLASH OF UNIVERSITY AND CORPORATE CULTURES

The corporate culture and practices of the contract organization may be at odds with either the culture and practices of the university or the content of the courses. We have experienced this tension in several ways. In one case, nearly all of the students in the education program, just prior to arriving, had been together at a training experience in which they were very much taught to work within guidelines presented by the employer. The nature of many of our courses is to encourage students to think outside any predetermined frameworks. In a second case, definitions of leadership were introduced that did not agree with the definition of leadership the organization espoused. In a third case, an employer had a very specific writing style that was used organization-wide. This style emphasized bullet points and was not seen as appropriate for coursework by many professors. A final example occurred in a course on communication and conflict. In the class, students perform feedback exercises. Several cohorts of one employer have been essentially unable to complete the activity because it is inconsistent with their organizational culture. Although this activity has never been an easy one in any class, in this case, the students could not even begin. Part of their hesitation arises because

they know they will work in the future with their fellow students. Open enrollment students can do the activity with someone with whom they will never work again.

UNIVERSITIES PERFORMING CORPORATE ACCOUNTABILITY FUNCTIONS

In some of our contract programs, students attend class on work time. The question arises, Is lack of attendance at class (in which attendance is traditionally not recorded) tantamount to missing work, or does a student fulfill his or her work obligation simply by successfully completing the course, regardless of his or her attendance record? The organizations require the students to sign a waiver, allowing their grades to be released to the employer. Should the university also provide the organization with attendance data if requested? This reporting function is one that universities do not do for open enrollment student employers (or for parents of undergraduates, for that matter).

One of the central questions for university officials, therefore, becomes how far should the university go in allowing the employer to mediate the relationship between the university and the student? Because the students are often a select group who are given this opportunity by their employer, they are not in a position to resist and will basically sign any apparently reasonable request the employer imposes on them. We have had an employer request that we provide midsemester reviews of students to ensure that the students are on track. The contract representative wants to be in a position to provide additional assistance to any student who may be struggling. Should the university identify students as struggling to an employer midsemester? What if a student appears severely depressed? Should the university notify the employer so that the employer's Employee Assistance Program can be used? We had a situation in which a student expressed serious concern to the contract representative about another student. The representative wanted the professors to confirm the report of the concerned student. To date, we have not provided information such as this to our contract employers, and although they have accepted our rationale, they see us as less than compassionate for not being more willing to get students the help the employers say they can provide.

THE CORPORATION AS A STAKEHOLDER OF THE UNIVERSITY

When a contract is in place, the contract organization becomes a stakeholder in the university program. It may even be seen as a partner. The terms *stakeholder* and *partner* suggest that the employer has some voice, influence,

or authority in the administration of the university program. We have never experienced an explicit suggestion that the employer could terminate the contract if a situation is not resolved to satisfaction. Yet, the implicit possibility is always there. Several examples highlight this dynamic. Can an employer essentially veto the use of an instructor (particularly an adjunct professor)? Envision a scenario in which one or two outspoken students complain bitterly to their contract representative and he or she requests that the professor not be used again for its contract. Should the university comply, even though it would not ordinarily stop using a professor under such circumstances?

A corporation may want to ensure that its money is well spent and may pressure the university to modify a course design accordingly. The employer may want the education to be, in its terms, more “work related.” The modifications it suggests, for example, may be more appropriate for training experiences than degree programs. Or, for example, in a strategic management class, the employer may suggest that the organization’s strategic plan be used as a case study and that a senior manager of the organization be brought in as a guest speaker to conduct that session. We encourage “real, live” examples such as this. At the same time, if the organization’s senior leader intends for the session to be about “selling” the company’s strategy rather than about how the strategic plan was created, the session is no longer consistent with the course’s academic goals. The potential exists for the organization to apply even greater pressure to substitute required courses that the employer may not see as relevant, alter the design of a given course, or request that a course be offered in a compressed timeframe when the faculty feel that such compression conflicts with the course objectives.

COLLECTIVE STUDENT CLOUT

Barnett and Muse (1993) note, “A growing number of adult educators underscore the need for participants in an instructional setting to have some control over both the content of the learning experiences and the group’s decision-making processes” (p. 408). Although this is true for adult students in general, we have found that contract-cohort students insist on a higher level of participation in the planning and conduct of learning. This student expectation gets manifested in several ways, several of which are represented in Table 1 below.

In this example, the students organize themselves into an academic committee that they empower to speak on behalf of the class. The academic committee may approach the administrators or the faculty members with requests. These have included their preference for how the course is

TABLE 1
The Academic Team

Background: The right hand column is the unspoken thoughts of the professor and student. The student is an employee with a corporation who has had a contract with a university for a cohort degree program for a few years. By the second year in the program, the students have organized themselves in many ways, one of which is by naming an academic committee to work with each professor on class issues. The academic committee is empowered to speak on behalf of the entire cohort. The professor is an adjunct faculty member.

<i>Actual Dialogue</i>	<i>Unspoken Thoughts</i>
Student: Hello, professor. I'm Alec Lee, the chair of the academic team for this cohort. I understand you are going to be our leadership professor this semester, and I'd like to discuss with you some aspects of the class.	I want to get off on the right foot with this professor.
Professor: Sure, Alec. It's nice to meet you. What's on your mind.	Academic team? I guess I heard this group does stuff like this, but what on earth does he have in mind?
Student: Well, now that we've been in the program for a year, we've gotten some things worked out that seem to make things go more smoothly. For example, I'd like to coordinate with you and the other two professors so that we do not have three midterms all within a couple of days.	I'll start off with something fairly benign, like coordinating exams.
Professor: Fine. That shouldn't be a problem.	Well, that's not an unreasonable request.
Student: I also wanted to find out about your teaching style. We have found that the classes that are primarily lecture haven't been as interesting as the others. Another item is that our previous professors have provided us with handouts of any overhead slides they use. We have found that very helpful. And, we designed our own course evaluation survey that we will give to the cohort half way through the class. Once we have those results, we'd like to meet with you and discuss any improvements that could be made in the second half of the course.	That was fairly easy. Let's try some of the tougher ones.

conducted (no dry lectures), conducting their own midcourse evaluation and meeting with the professor to discuss the results, negotiating exam dates or due dates, and requesting overheads to be distributed in hardcopy or via e-mail to the students. The students also may enlist the help of their contract representative on such items. Students in open enrollment classes could make the same requests, but they do not have the same organizational ability, nor do

they have a contract representative who can lobby on their behalf. The “unspoken thoughts” were obtained by the author from students and professors.

The Nature of Professor-Student Interactions

THE STUDENTS OUT-ORGANIZE THE FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Obtaining a contract often represents a large amount of growth for a university program. Many adjunct faculty are used and the pool of adjuncts often has to be increased to handle the growth in enrollments. A consequence of this growth is that after only one semester into a contract, the employer and students are far better organized—integrated, with better continuity and with a better picture of the entire program—than most, if not all, of the faculty and administrators. The employer cohort is clearly a social system rather than a collection of loosely connected students. This results in a number of interesting “reverse” dynamics. For example, the students may be the ones to tell the faculty how certain procedures are handled with their cohort. A student with an unusual situation also can come to the faculty with an expected solution, knowing that a student in a similar situation 2 years ago received that solution.

STUDENTS' EXPECTATIONS OF FACULTY EXPERIENCE

Barnett and Muse (1993) suggest, “Cohort groups of students may be more vocal than traditional students regarding the quality of teaching and the relevance of course materials. Over time the group may become cohesive and might attempt to alter the program” (p. 411). Our experience has been similar. Although to date, we have experienced little, if any, pressure to alter course materials, we have found that students expect their professors to speak from experience. In other words, they want professors who also have substantial work experience and who have practiced the concepts that they now profess. Many business or management faculty members do not have this experience or do not have this orientation in the way they conduct their classes. Contract-cohort students in our programs have questioned the credibility and relevance of faculty who have been primarily researchers in organizations without also having work experience the students respect.

EQUITY IN GRADING ACROSS SECTIONS

If the cohort is large enough for students to be assigned into two or more course sections, there is increased pressure for the sections to be as close to

identical as possible in design, delivery, and workload, for example. Perhaps because our contract-cohort students do not select their course sections or professors, the perceived level of equity is elevated tremendously over an open enrollment situation in which students can self-select against a tough professor, for example. The most sensitive part of this dynamic is whether grade distribution is the same across course sections. Students (and the employer contract representative) often have the expectation that the average grade for two different sections should be approximately the same. Our open enrollment students have anecdotal data about certain professors grading hard. In a contract-cohort program, the contract representative (our students also typically compile the data for themselves) has aggregate data in which such differences between sections, between sections in different years, and so on, are easily calculated. He or she may not have an appreciation for sampling variation, for example, and automatically assumes that if the average grades differ, then one professor graded easier than the other and that this was unfair to half of the students.

GRADES USED FOR PROMOTION DECISIONS

A further complication arises with respect to grades. The contract organization may choose to use academic grades as a differentiator for work decisions. For example, students may have some choice in their next job assignment, and the order of that choice may depend on GPA ranking. Or more simply, a student who graduates with distinction may have this additional credential that could break a tie if two people are being considered for the same position. This additional use of grades creates a dissonant dynamic. Our programs require group work, and our experience is that the students inherently want to help each other (consistent with their organization's culture). At the same time, the students are aware that the assistance they provide may hurt their opportunities for advancement in the organization. At face, this dynamic may not seem too different from fresh graduates who have a better chance of obtaining an ideal job if their GPA is higher. In practice, this tension is magnified because of the nature of the contract-cohort experience.

THE UNIVERSITY CAUGHT BETWEEN COMPETING INTERESTS OF THE CORPORATION

Different employer representatives (for example, the contract representative and a given student's manager) may place competing demands on the student, which then often get shunted to the university. For example, the employer representative may say that school is the student's top priority and

that the students' managers know that they must accommodate the students' school schedules. Yet, a manager may insist that a student miss a group presentation to go on a business trip. The student, who is placed in a bind, may then ask a professor for some accommodation that is different from what is represented in the agreement between the employer and the university. The professor may feel extra pressure to assist the student because faculty-student relationships "tend to be more personal than in traditional classes" (Basom et al., 1996, p. 105). A practical example of this issue is featured in Table 2.

The Nature of Student-Student Interactions

THE COHORT AS A SOCIAL SYSTEM

Because the contract-cohort students tend to be much more cohesive than open enrollment classes, individual conversations between a single student and a professor often become generalized to the entire group. For example, preliminary feedback given to a student on a paper before its due date may be communicated by the student to the entire class (especially when e-mail is in use). We have experienced at least two significant problems when this happens. One is that the professor may have been providing feedback that was customized to the student (for example, heavily emphasizing one point only because it was absent from the paper. The emphasis, however, would not apply to the entire assignment generally). The second problem is the more general issue of filtering. Other students take the word of the student who met with the teacher as a perfect communicator of the professor's comments. However, all sorts of distortions can be introduced when a student tells others what the professor said.

COHORT "CLIFF NOTES"

The built-in cohesion of the contract-cohort students has resulted in each group creating "Cliff Notes" versions of our courses; each individual in the class is responsible for summarizing either a portion of chapters assigned or class discussions. When this assignment and execution occurs early in the semester, students can choose to rely on reading only the summary of chapters assigned rather than the complete assignments themselves. Although it is possible for this to occur in an open enrollment class, such students do not have an easy mechanism for organizing themselves. It also has not been a problem that we have encountered to date, probably because our graduate courses, in seminar format, are revised frequently, rendering nearly useless

TABLE 2
The Super-Duper Stealth

Background: The left-hand column is the actual dialogue. The right-hand column is the unspoken thoughts of the professor and student. The class is in organizational behavior and has a lot of group work. The course focuses on individual growth and development, and the class sessions are critical to that aspect of the course. The professor is an adjunct faculty member.

<i>Actual Dialogue</i>	<i>Unspoken Thoughts</i>
Student: Professor, I have really been enjoying this class.	I should say something nice to set the tone.
Professor: Well, that's very nice to hear.	Uh-oh, I wonder what's coming.
Student: Yeah. So, I wanted to ask you about something.	
Professor: What's that?	
Student: I've been given the opportunity to fly the military's new Super-Duper Stealth fighter (SDSF) plane. It's the chance of a lifetime. The only problem is that there is only one session of the 4-week training course for the SDSF. It would mean I would miss the 4 weeks of class just before the final exam.	I need to be polite, but the important this is for my career, compared with this class.
Professor: Well, missing that much of a class like this means that you would really miss out on much of what is important about this course. Why not drop the class this semester and take it next time?	This student does not realize how important the interaction in class is. I want to be helpful, but I do not want to gut the course either.
Student: Oh, I could not do that. That would mean I wouldn't graduate at the same time as my cohort. Actually, if I didn't graduate on time, that would put a black mark on my record. They probably wouldn't let me fly the SDSF anyway, if that happened. Besides, I've already worked it out with the statistics and economics professors, and they do not have a problem. Plus, I know when Katrina Jones was in a similar situation 2 years ago that the university let her do her course work from a remote training site.	I see the professor isn't going to make this easy for me. Why is she being so difficult when it isn't a problem for others?

such resources as a "test bank." The difference with contract-cohort students is that the summaries are produced in real time. Typically, by the fourth week of the semester, the entire reading load is available in summary form.

WHAT CONSTITUTES INDIVIDUAL WORK IN A COHORT?

Courses often have some components that are to be done individually. However, the contract-cohort groups are often so cohesive because they study together, carpool together, socialize together, and so forth that the work of individuals often seems remarkably alike, even when they have not cheated in the traditional sense. Group work is strongly encouraged in our programs. At the same time, every class has a portion of the grade determined by individual work. Barnett and Muse (1993) note that cohort students who work closely together for a concentrated period of time often “question the idea of being competitively graded with one another” (p. 409).

Many professors have had to change their practices accordingly. For example, if a professor plans a midterm exam and hands out a list of 50 study questions of which 15 will be on the in-class exam, we have learned that we will get essentially the same exam from nearly all of our students, none of whom cheated during the exam. Because they shared with each other so much of the thought process they were using to understand concepts, they essentially converge on a single understanding of how to respond to each question. Consequently, we have had to rethink what individual work means in our programs.

Conclusion

We would modify the opening quotation of this article to say that a contract-cohort model holds the potential of being a better learning environment for management and leadership than any other model currently in use. It has all of the advantages of the cohort model, with the additional advantages we have experienced with a contract employer—greater student cohesion, continuity of the program across cohort years, an employment situation in which others have been through the same program, formal mentoring of current students by graduates, a relatively consistent set of working values that mirror the employer’s culture, and a deep partnership between the university and an employer in the community, among others.

Realizing the potential of this learning environment, however, means addressing issues of shared governance or partnership that will be a new experience for nearly all university programs. This article is a starting point in explicating some of those issues. We conclude with suggestions for universities that will enter into similar contract-cohort situations and implications for future study.

**SUGGESTIONS FOR INITIATING
A CONTRACT-COHORT DEGREE PROGRAM**

Many who teach organizational behavior courses introduce the topic of the psychological contract (Sherwood & Glidewell, 1972). Plowing the unknown ground of a relationship between a university and a corporation for a degree program is an excellent opportunity for management faculty to practice what they preach and employ a model such as the psychological contract. We have endeavored to do this in the most recent contract we are negotiating. Basically, the objective is for the parties to make explicit as many assumptions and expectations as they can imagine. For example, the university representatives should learn what the corporation expects in terms of group treatment—group grade reports, restriction on elective courses taken by their students, deconflicting other activities the employee/students may have, and so forth. Several other topics to explore are highlighted in this article and would include the admissions criteria and decision-making process, and choice and design of curriculum.

Other efforts should be directed at establishing an ideal learning community of faculty and students. Because we have experienced consistent dynamics from several years of cohorts, we have decided to have a meeting of the faculty and students in which we use Argyris and Schon's Action Map (Argyris & Schön, 1996). Action maps are graphical ways of representing patterns of governing conditions, framing orientation, action strategies, and second-order and other consequences, as well as the interactions among these. Action maps allow for the creation of "hypotheses about what drives learning and antilearning activities within the organization" (Argyris & Schön, 1996, p. 154-155). An example of an agenda item from the students' perspective follows³.

- Governing condition: Students are not used to receiving anything but the highest grades.
- Framing orientation: Students consider grading criteria arbitrary and varied from instructor to instructor.
- Action strategies: Students complain and challenge grades, particularly if they receive a lower grade than expected.
- Second-order consequences: Students make anonymous, vindictive comments on course evaluations.
- Other consequences: Increased distrust between instructors and students.

Because the students would have learned this process in a course they take as part of their degree program, it is one they easily understand and to which they relate. Changes then are suggested to modify the action map accordingly.

Although articulating the psychological contract, negotiating pinch points, and constructing action maps can avoid a significant number of issues, it is not possible to foresee all possible problems. In our case, for example, although we had taught cohort students before, we would never have anticipated the tremendous cohesion and group dynamics of a contract-cohort group, and the collective front they can present on issues of importance to them. It is important to establish up front a process that will be employed when unforeseen issues do arise.

IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE STUDY

Because so little work has been done in this area, it is ripe for future study in a number of avenues. One area would be to provide a more complete picture of what exactly is happening in this country with respect to contract-cohort graduate management degree programs. How many programs exist, and are they alike or dissimilar? Second, research should be conducted to determine what modifications, if any, universities have made to accommodate the desires of corporations to influence the degree programs. Burack, Burack, and Miller (1999), for example, have called for substantial institutional change on the part of university business schools to be more accommodating to corporations. A third avenue of research would be to study the impact on organizations of a group of cohort students who received their MBA together versus the impact of students who received their MBA degrees from a variety of institutions. Finally, it would be interesting to compare the GPA, comprehensive exam performance, or other metrics of performance of the contract-cohort students with open enrollment students to see which constitutes a more effective learning environment.

Notes

1. The work of this article began with a presentation to the 1998 National Conference on The Adult Learner, "Contract Cohort Education Programs: Lessons Learned from Three Case Studies," with Dr. Cynthia H. Roman. The use of the terms *we* and *our* in this article refers to the author and Dr. Roman.

2. The word *corporate* is used in this article in the broad sense, which includes government, nonprofit, and other types of organizations in the world of work.

3. Thanks to my colleague, Dr. Nancy Dixon, for sharing this action map example.

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