Impact of Professional Background on Problem Perception Among Community College Leaders

Giorgianni, Thomas E.

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With the rising need for community college administrators, many colleges are looking outside of academia for individuals to fill upper-level positions. Controversy has risen over administrative hires as to whether the incumbent should be from within academia or from business. This leads us to question if there is a difference between individuals that have been working within academia versus those that have worked in business.

Considering that an individual’s perception is one of the major inputs into the decision-making process, testing the individual's perception might yield some insight and help to determine if any differences do exist between those individuals who have worked in either academia or business. This research tests if community college administrator’s work history and/or educational background have a relationship with their perception. If selective perception is evidenced, then it might influence whether community colleges should take professional background into account when looking to academics or to business professionals to hire as administrators.

This research consists of two studies collecting basic background information on selected subjects, along with their respective educational backgrounds, work histories, survey responses, and interviews. The research methodology utilized was based on the studies of Dearborn et al., Walsh, and Beyer et al. The first study requested each subject to read a case, identify the issues in the case, rank each identified issue on a Likert scale (1-7), and note which of all the identified issues is most important. The second study examined variances in subjects’ issue perception, word utilization, and mental content in a more open ended interview format.

The research shows strong support for selective perception based on professional background. It also shows that administrators from the two groups tend to preference different mental models, academics preferring ‘inclusive’ approaches, compared to the more ‘top down’ approaches of administrators with business background. Finally, the research raises questions as to the differential impact of ‘on the job socialization’ on both groups.