

From "Full-Time" to "Professional": The Evolution of Party Organizational Officers in Universities

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Abstract

The professionalization of Party organizational officers in universities is crucial for the quality of grassroots Party-building work and the fundamental task of cultivating moral values and nurturing people. The key to achieving their professionalization lies in shaping their professional identity in practice. To promote the transition of Party organizational officers in universities from being "full-time" to becoming "professional", a framework for explaining their professional development is constructed from the perspective of identity construction using the theory of Community of practice. Addressing the current practical difficulties faced by Party organizational officers, such as changes of participatory roles, evolution of affiliation patterns, and shifts in practice fields, we should enhance professional autonomy, professional synergy, and professional effectiveness from the perspective of building communities of practice. This approach aims to foster value recognition of the professional identity of Party organizational officers from the inside out.

Keywords

Party Organizational Officer; Professionalization; Community of Practice; Identity.

1. Introduction

As a special group among university teachers, Party organizational officers in universities hold dual roles as both administrators and educators. They are an important force in combining organizational building with educational guidance and are key nodes in connecting and optimizing governance. In 2017, the Party Committee of the Ministry of Education issued the "Standards for Party Building Work of Students in General Higher Education Institutions," which included the construction of the organizational officer team in the overall planning of university talent teams. It explicitly stated that "each college (department) should be equipped with 1-2 full-time organizational officers," and implemented a dual-track promotion method and an incentive mechanism for positions and ranks. With the attention and support of relevant policies, university organizational officers have transitioned from "part-time" to "fully full-time," further increasing their degree of professionalization and actively responding to President call to "continuously improve the quality of Party building and organizational work" [1].

However, in practice, problems such as weak professional knowledge, lack of work experience, and insufficient professional spirit among Party organizational officers in universities are still prominent [2]. Existing research mainly focuses on the policy level, paying more attention to the duties and capabilities of Party organizational officers in universities, highlighting the significant impact of historical and institutional environments [3]. However, there is insufficient focus on the individual level of organizational officers, often overlooking the holistic grasp of the interaction relationships between various actors. Through in-depth exploration of

the work practices of university organizational officers, it is found that the value recognition of professional identity is key to achieving the professionalization of their work. In other words, how to shape identity in practice is a practical problem that needs to be solved for Party organizational officers in universities to move towards professionalization. Therefore, this article attempts to explore how to promote the transition of Party organizational officers in universities from "full-time" to "professional" from the perspective of professional identity construction using the theory of Community of Practice.

2. Community of Practice: A New Perspective on the Professional Development of Party Organizational Officers Universities

Durkheim pointed out in "The Division of Labor in Society" that "society is willing to drive people towards continuous specialization" [4]. In the process of the transformational development of universities, the professionalization of Party organizational officers in universities aims to strengthen the quality of grassroots Party-building and organizational work. Its basic characteristics include directly engaging with students and faculty Party members to provide educational guidance, and its fundamental requirement is to enhance the scientific and effective management of Party member development and education. The ultimate goal is to gradually achieve value recognition of organizational officers as professional grassroots Party workers. By analyzing the connotations and components of the theory of Communities of Practice, it is found that the process of professional development of Party organizational officers logically aligns with the process of constructing a community of practice. This alignment can be used to build an explanatory framework for the professional development of Party organizational officers in universities.

2.1. The Theoretical Connotations and Components of Communities of Practice

This paper takes the theory of Communities of Practice, proposed by Wenger and others, as the core concept. A community of practice here refers to a partnership within an organization that utilizes each other's practical experiences for mutual learning [5]. Individual identity development relies on the support and involvement of community members rather than simple geographic or unit boundaries [6]. Wenger further points out that the components of a community of practice include "mutual engagement", "joint enterprise", and "shared repertoire" [7].

"Mutual engagement" reveals that the essence of learning is not merely receiving education but continuously participating in interactions, reproducing knowledge within the community of practice, and transforming from a "novice" to an "expert." "Joint enterprise" explains that a community of practice also exists as a mechanism of socialization. Members reach consensus on ideals and beliefs through interaction and negotiation, thus gaining legitimacy in their identity construction. "Shared repertoire" refers to the public resources generated in the process of mutual engagement and joint enterprise, such as ways of doing things, practices, discourses, institutions, tools, etc. These resources not only carry the practices of the community's history but also serve as the resources to be used for generating new meanings. Therefore, "mutual engagement", "joint enterprise", and "shared repertoire" as distinct characteristics of a community of practice provide direction for developing individual identity within the community.

2.2. The Professional Development of Party Organizational Officers in Universities from the Perspective of Communities of Practice: An Explanatory Framework

For both individual and group organizational officers, participating in the management and educational processes inherently has the potential to construct a community of practice. Using

the theory of Communities of Practice as an analytical perspective, it can be found that the professionalization of Party organizational officers is a dynamic developmental process. This process involves three aspects: the professional domain, the administrative domain, and the practice domain. The professional domain aims to form the unique professional knowledge and working methods of organizational officers as community members, requiring professional autonomy. The administrative domain focuses on leveraging the structural role of organizational officers in joint enterprises through negotiated meanings, necessitating professional synergy. The practice domain seeks diversified shared resources for the professional creation and reproduction of organizational officers, calling for professional effectiveness. Therefore, applying the theory of Communities of Practice to construct an explanatory framework for the professional development of Party organizational officers in universities is practically feasible.

2.2.1. The Knowledge Logic of "Mutual Engagement"

From a professional domain perspective, organizational officers need to accumulate and reproduce knowledge through participation. In this process, various forms of communities of practice spontaneously form between new and experienced officers, as well as between officers and their teams. Sociology of knowledge suggests that knowledge is a prerequisite for all roles, determining the social system they engage in, the social occupation they pursue, and the social role they perform [8]. The work of organizational officers reveals the objective laws of Party building, and the unique knowledge system distinct from other professions is an explicit feature of professionalization. As members sharing and reproducing knowledge, organizational officers must adhere to professional perspectives and values in practice, using professional methods and techniques to provide precise services to Party members and organizations. They need to adjust work plans according to different situations, help their service targets enhance their capabilities, and achieve high-quality development. Through various methods, they integrate resources, collaborate with Party and government departments to achieve vertical and horizontal coordination, and fully participate in grassroots Party building and education. Organizational officers in communities of practice link explicit and implicit, normative and creative knowledge abilities, merging personal knowledge into collective wisdom.

2.2.2. The Process-Relationship Logic of "Joint Enterprise"

From an administrative domain perspective, given the diversity and complexity of faculty governance, organizational officers must form synergies with other teams to continuously expand the scope of the community of practice. The process-relationship logic reflects the spatial-temporal structure of joint enterprises among multiple subjects in mutual negotiation. The professionalism of university organizational officers develops under this dual influence. On one hand, the process involves continuous practice interactions that generate social meaning. University organizational officers interact with other actors and engage in processual meaning negotiations at different levels. On the other hand, relationships develop, occur, and manifest within the process. The position of university organizational officers within the university's relational network is dynamic. Considering the diversity and complexity of interaction relationships, Party organizational officers must continuously improve work methods to adapt to changes in the external environment, demonstrating competence and discourse power within the community of practice. This allows them to play a greater role in joint enterprises. By establishing common value goals, they gradually gain external recognition, organizational support, and broad acknowledgment from faculty and students. Internal autonomy and external support will provide a broader space for professional development, leading organizational officers towards maturity.

2.2.3. The Material Logic of "Shared Repertoire"

From a practice domain perspective, Party organizational officers must actively integrate into the new educational practices of universities, continually breaking organizational boundaries through the formation and reformation of communities of practice, thereby forming higher-level common understanding and collective wisdom. According to the Marxist view of practice, the essence of society lies in individuals gaining recognition from others and society through their labor and labor products, with labor products serving as the link of social relationships between people [9]. Material logic embodies the practice processes and product forms of communities of practice. In the Chinese context, the influence of institutional and policy environments is often fundamental and holistic. To create an external environment conducive to the professional development of Party organizational officers, it is necessary to follow "domain-specific" rather than "linear" thinking, giving comprehensive attention to the system of multi-stakeholder participation. This process requires top-down policy promotion and bottom-up activation of the subjects' vitality. Thus, it is essential to provide organizational officers with both endogenous educational support systems and exogenous incentive guarantee systems, enhancing their ability to cope with complex situations and work challenges.

3. Challenges of Communities of Practice: Real Dilemmas in the Professional Development of Party Organizational Officers in Universities

The transformation process of the professional identity of Party organizational officers in universities involves constructing communities of practice based on their job positions and shaping their identities within these communities. Given the diversity and complexity of grassroots governance, organizational officers in university faculties face real dilemmas such as role transition, belonging pattern evolution, and practice field switching, compared to their counterparts previously stationed at the university level, despite the enrichment and expansion of their work content.

3.1. The Dilemma of Transitioning from Subordinate to Autonomous Roles

The legitimate identity of Party organizational officers in grassroots Party building governance primarily derives from the organization, requiring dependency on superior organizations and administrative entities. Their political roles exhibit a clear subordination: on one hand, they are led by the university and superior organizations, and on the other hand, they must accept the management of their respective faculties. However, while being subordinate to superior organizations and administrative entities, their professional autonomy is significantly lacking. Due to the long-term institutional inertia of being managed as administrative staff, organizational officers tend to define their identity as executors rather than educators. Their work primarily depends on directives from superiors, mainly completing superficial, index-driven tasks, lacking reflection on professional missions, values, theories, and practices. This mode increasingly appears out of sync with the university's trend towards "de-administration". On one hand, organizational officers face a crisis of distancing from their service targets, with their work being occupied by various forms, materials, and administrative records, leaving insufficient time and energy to deeply engage with and guide faculty and students, thus failing to gain widespread understanding and support. This clearly deviates from the original intention of the organizational officer role. Due to the lack of in-depth frontline investigation and research, organizational officers cannot understand new situations and problems emerging at the grassroots level, hindering the effective accumulation and enhancement of professional knowledge and skills. On the other hand, the communication mechanism among organizational officers is not well-established, with insufficient professional communication channels. There

is a lack of platforms for sharing practical experiences, verifying and promoting outcomes, causing organizational officers scattered across various faculties to become increasingly isolated and "atomized," making it difficult to develop a shared knowledge system.

3.2. The Dilemma of Evolving from Marginalized to Coordinated Belonging Patterns

Learning requires the mutual promotion of experience and competence, and competence depends on our ability to contribute to the production of collective meaning. When there is a split between meaning production and adoption, it leads to an imbalance in the ownership of meaning, causing members whose contributions are never adopted to become marginalized [10]. The marginalization of organizational officers is reflected in the marginalization of competence due to insufficient participation, and the marginalization of experience due to being ignored. Currently, there are clear boundaries and a lack of practical connection between Party building teams, ideological and political teams, teaching teams, and administrative teams. Party building and education have not yet formed a cohesive force, essentially reflecting that universities generally prioritize the use of organizational officers over their cultivation, lacking comprehensive consideration in job design and long-term planning for team building.

Vertically, although organizational officers, like other Party workers, belong to a certain level of Party organization and report upward, they neither directly participate in faculty decision-making nor effectively influence upwards or downwards. Over time, organizational officers develop into non-participatory roles, struggling to form a voice, further exacerbating the lack of competence. Horizontally, there is little coordination between university organizational officers and other work teams. Although there are functional overlaps with counselors and Party branch secretaries, their position in the current evaluation system is not prominent, and their role is easily overlooked, directly leading to the marginalization of their work experience.

3.3. The Dilemma of Switching from a Closed to an Effective Practice Field

The field is the basic analytical unit of social practice activities, involving the actors and the social structure, described as "a large network or configuration of objective relations existing between various positions" [11]. In the higher education field, there are many relatively independent sub-fields, each with its own logic and rules. As the pattern of "all-staff, all-process, all-round education" evolves, the boundaries of the field become more dynamic and elastic, presenting possibilities for diversified development. However, under the existing institutional arrangements, the practice scope of university organizational officers is relatively narrow and singular. The relatively closed environment leads to insufficient interaction among multiple subjects and inadequate integration of resources, affecting the effectiveness of practical work and limiting the professional development of organizational officers.

Firstly, the educational system is incomplete. There is no scientific system for the education and training of organizational officers, and the carriers for playing the role of Party building and education are not clearly defined, with insufficient academic resources for Party building research. After the position of organizational officers became full-time, the lack of professional guidance means they cannot demonstrate differentiated professional advantages compared to counselors and ideological and political course teachers. Secondly, the incentive and guarantee mechanisms are weakened. The implicit work achievements of organizational officers are difficult to evaluate, lacking effective work quality assessment mechanisms. It is difficult to establish timely feedback based on the evaluation of actual work performance to help dynamically improve work capabilities. The existing assessment methods tend to incentivize individuals rather than collectives, which to some extent hinders cooperation, exchange, and knowledge sharing. Additionally, related benefits and promotion incentives for organizational

officers have not been fully implemented, causing a gap in development expectations and reducing their sense of identity and belonging in their work.

4. Constructing Communities of Practice: Key Strategies for the Professional Development of Party Organizational Officers in Universities

As an important force in the university Party affairs workforce, the professional development of Party organizational officers needs to be considered within the specific context of practice. It is essential to fully recognize the structural position of this team within the university Party building and education systems. From the perspective of Communities of Practice theory, the professional development of organizational officers should focus on three aspects: joint participation, cooperative enterprise, and shared resources. This will maximize the importance of knowledge networks, relational networks, and resource networks in enhancing professional autonomy, professional synergy, and professional effectiveness, thus fostering a value recognition for university organizational officers from within.

4.1. Professional Field: Transforming Role Perceptions through Joint Participation to Enhance Professional Autonomy

Enhancing professional autonomy means breaking the inherent administrative role perceptions, adjusting work boundaries through participation and practice, reshaping knowledge networks, deepening professional mission and values, and transitioning from administrative agents to governance agents and from "tools" to "learners." The legitimacy of an organizational officer's identity comes not only from the top-down organizational assignment but also from the bottom-up support and recognition from service recipients. The stronger the professionalism exhibited by organizational officers in their work, the greater the trust and resource support they receive, leading to increased autonomy and creating a virtuous cycle.

Firstly, it is necessary to return to the governance concept of "people-oriented," which encompasses three meanings: (I)Working for "people": Party organizational officers should step out from behind their desks and dedicate more energy to serving Party members and the masses. They should seize significant opportunities to strengthen political guidance, pay attention to and study new situations and problems, and complete the mutual transformation between political discourse and mass discourse, academic discourse, and practical discourse. (II)Relying on "people" to do work: They should harness the initiative of Party members and teachers and students, creatively carry out Party building work, and focus on overcoming shortcomings and bottlenecks. (III)Working for the benefit of "people": They should leverage Party building to guide moral education, enrich pathways for comprehensive personal development, and provide qualified builders and successors for the Party and the country.

Secondly, it is crucial to strengthen professional carriers and career belonging. Professional organizations are not only an objective need for shaping the professional identity of Party organizational officers but also an important means of stimulating their self-efficacy and sense of career belonging. Currently, there is no nationwide professional organization for organizational officers with broad coverage and significant influence. While Shanghai has started exploring the establishment of the "Party Organizational Officers' Home" joint meeting organization, it is still in the early stages of small-scale exploration. Fully leveraging the autonomy of professional organizations and encouraging lasting collaborative relationships between new and experienced organizational officers, and between organizational officers and relevant work stakeholders, will help promote a common understanding of the work of organizational officers, thereby forming effective connections in cognition, emotion, and action.

4.2. Administrative Field: Promoting Meaning Negotiation through Cooperative Enterprise to Achieve Professional Synergy

Enhancing the synergy among various stakeholders requires establishing a consensus on ideology and practice at a higher level. Effective collaborative governance can only occur when there is trust and reciprocity among potential stakeholders, diverse interests are met, and the relative contributions of all parties are appropriately measured and recognized [12]. The role conflict faced by Party organizational officers in universities objectively reflects various constraints and contradictions in the university's transitional development. To shift the organizational officers' mode of belonging within the community of practice toward greater collaboration, it is essential to enhance their competence and discourse power through the meaning production of cooperative enterprises, thereby establishing a positive cycle for professional development.

Firstly, optimizing job settings to leverage organizational officers' competence is crucial. Professionalized job settings require a clear definition of the organizational officers' career positioning. This involves conducting job analysis and team classification from the top down, providing guidance for enhancing professional capabilities and spirit. The development of "professional capability standards" and "professional grade standards" for organizational officers should be expedited. These standards should differentiate the core competencies and competency requirements of organizational officers from those of counselors, ideological and political educators, and administrative personnel, allowing for targeted adjustment and optimization of team structures and promoting job-person fit. Additionally, it is important to emphasize summarizing and publicizing the "spirit of organizational officers" and the image of excellent organizational officers to shape public perception of the role and create stable long-term career development expectations.

Secondly, establishing consultation mechanisms to enhance the discourse power of organizational officers is essential. Modernizing university governance calls for the collective participation of multiple stakeholders under the leadership of Party building. To overcome the "silo" phenomenon among various Party organizations, it is necessary to strengthen the value community consciousness and identity of grassroots organization actors. Party organizational officers occupy key nodal positions within the university governance system. Establishing and improving mechanisms for organizational officers to participate in decision-making discussions will help enhance their discourse power, vertically connecting the "nerve endings" of grassroots organizations and horizontally balancing normative and creative aspects, maximizing the effectiveness of policies and directives from higher authorities.

4.3. Practice Field: Reshaping the Practice Field through Shared Resources to Activate Professional Effectiveness

Individual or organizational behavior is shaped by institutional factors, which are embedded in higher-level social systems [13]. The professional development of university organizational officers is embedded in the university's transitional development process. Therefore, it is necessary to respond to the requirements of the times on the basis of inherited development and achieve creative transformation through strengthened work linkage. To move from the discursive "community of educators" to a self-aware and spontaneous "community of practice," it is necessary to create composite fields for organizational officers to reshape their professional identities.

Firstly, improving educational support to create a composite practice learning field is necessary. This involves introducing diverse educational entities and encouraging organizational officers to conduct project-based cooperation beyond organizational boundaries to gain different knowledge insights and action reflections, thus stimulating self-potential. Leveraging the nationwide initiatives of "Party Building Leadership" and the construction of the "Great

Ideological and Political Course," organizational officers can identify their advantages and cultivate their professional expertise from broader practices. For example, since 2018, the Ministry of Education has cultivated and established 299 Party building "model departments" through its double innovation projects, where organizational officers have undertaken a significant amount of work. Additionally, strengthening educational guidance and establishing an open and diverse pre-service and in-service education system for organizational officers is crucial. Education authorities and universities should jointly manage this effort, integrating expertise from Party school scholars, ideological and political educators, and experienced practitioners to form a professional mentor team. This team would consolidate "menu-style" educational resources and construct a "three-dimensional" practice platform, fostering a positive cycle of self-directed learning among organizational officers.

Secondly, emphasizing resource input to strengthen incentive and support mechanisms is important. This includes enhancing the input of authoritative resources, as leaders' positioning of organizational officers directly affects their self-perception and career understanding. Education authorities and universities should strengthen their research and guidance on the organizational officer team, ensuring the implementation of welfare and promotion channels to motivate organizational officers to invest more in their work. Furthermore, promoting the decentralization of configurational resources by encouraging organizational officers to lead the application for Party building practice and research projects, supporting the establishment of studios, and recognizing their contributions in collective work is essential. Lastly, leveraging the motivational role of the assessment "stick" through project-based learning to enhance professional capabilities, providing guidance and supervision throughout the project learning process, and using formative assessment to evaluate organizational officers' phase objectives, emphasizing feedback and improvement on actual work effectiveness will help avoid goal misalignment and career burnout.

5. Conclusion

The professional development of Party organizational officers in universities is necessary to address new situations and problems in grassroots Party building under new circumstances. It is also an urgent need for the development of the officers themselves and an inevitable choice for the innovative development of the Party work team. To some extent, the professional development of organizational officers is embedded in the process of university transformation. Analyzing these practical issues from the perspective of the community of practice helps to leverage the structural role of university organizational officers in Party building and education, thereby improving overall work quality. In conclusion, the transition of university organizational officers from being "full-time" to becoming "professional" is a complex and gradual process. It requires understanding the logic of practice and exerting aligned efforts from the inside out to achieve the transformation of the officers' professional identity. This will provide strong support for the high-quality integrated development of university Party building and undertakings.

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