

The Role Dilemma and Adjustment of Grassroots Administrative Personnel in Colleges and Universities: A Study from Chinese Mainland

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Abstract: As complex organizations, colleges and universities are structured around academic departments as their core units for educational activities. Within these departments, grassroots administrative staff undertake numerous responsibilities yet frequently encounter multifaceted role dilemmas. Research indicates that the operational efficacy of departmental administrative organizations—including their characteristics of authority, role positioning, and power allocation—is influenced and disrupted by a multiplicity of factors. This paper aims to investigate the role dilemmas faced by grassroots administrative staff in academic departments and to explore potential optimization strategies. We propose a management paradigm shift from process control to objective-oriented governance, the implementation of flatter organizational structures, the decentralization of managerial authority, and an operational reform centered on academic priorities. These measures are intended to enhance administrative efficiency and contribute to the modernization and high-performance governance of universities.

1. Introduction

In recent years, China's national "Double First-Class" initiative has brought heightened attention to the development of higher education. Whereas considerable public attention has been paid to the development of "first-class universities" and "first-class disciplines" and their implications for faculty and students, scholarly inquiry into university administrative staff remains limited.

Recent studies have examined the optimization of university administration and issues related to administrative staff from various perspectives. Regarding job burnout among administrative personnel, research by Brotheridge and Grandey found that the primary cause lies in the lack of positive feedback received by frontline administrative staff when dealing with complex interpersonal relationships. In some cases, they may even experience negative reactions, leading to profound feelings of burnout [1]. Further research could explore the relationship between administrative staff and university administration, as well as propose methods for optimization and

reform [2]. Robert Birnbaum has observed that “while governance structures may differ across universities, the effective functioning of a college depends more on the climate of interpersonal relationships and the socio-cultural context” [3]. There exists a certain level of trust between faculty and administrative staff [4]. In modern universities, within an institution where trust is established and a common language has been formed, although conflicts may arise, they are often “creative conflicts” and some degree of skepticism can be beneficial [5]. Other researchers have also examined the tension between administration and academia from their respective perspectives. Research by American scholar Philip Altbach indicates that the increasing proportion of administrative staff within universities—particularly senior administrators—who control funding and planning, has drawn academic attention [6]. To understand the relationship between academia and administration, it is essential to examine the dynamics among administrative staff, faculty, and students [7]. Kaplan contends that there is no fundamental conflict of interest or goals between academic and administrative functions [8]. Additionally, there is research concerning the professionalization of administrative staff. American scholar Boehm proposed five characteristics of professionalization: societal recognition of the professional status of an occupation; the capacity of the occupation to contribute to social development; the existence of a structured and systematic body of knowledge; a set of defined values; professionals possessing a specialized skill set; and the organization of members within the profession [9]. However, administrative staff often lack professional identity, face limited career advancement opportunities, receive low salaries, and suffer from low social recognition. Furthermore, incentive mechanisms and training systems for professional development are underdeveloped [10]. Moreover, since the nature of administrative work significantly differs from that of academic personnel, it is recommended that evaluations of administrative staff focus on outcomes, attitudes, and behaviors [11]. Other researchers argue that the assessment of administrative managers can be conducted from multiple perspectives, including behavior, results, criteria, and structure related to their roles [12].

Currently, grassroots administrative personnel in Chinese university faculties face challenges characterized by complex responsibilities and operational inefficiency. Within the college-based structure of Chinese universities, these colleges serve as the core units undertaking the institution's primary functions; they act as supportive departments within a larger organizational framework. Enhancing the efficiency of grassroots administrative staff is therefore crucial for stimulating institutional vitality and optimizing governance. These personnel play a vital role in the micro-governance of universities. This study aims to clarify role boundaries, achieve a balance of duties, and optimize management for greater scientific rigor and efficiency through in-depth research on the responsibilities and operational characteristics of these administrative staff. Concurrently, it seeks to provide a clear reform pathway and institutional logic for simplifying approval procedures, thereby contributing significantly to the long-term development of higher education.

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Subjects

This study utilized a combination of purposive and snowball sampling techniques to recruit participants from among grassroots administrative staff working in the administrative organizations of local undergraduate universities. The sampling process began by identifying initial contacts known to the researchers. Subsequently, these interviewees were asked to recommend other eligible colleagues, thereby creating a referral chain. This approach facilitated access to participants and enabled a deeper understanding of the research context, which was conducive to gathering rich and accurate data. Sampling was discontinued when additional interviews failed to yield new information, indicating that theoretical saturation had been reached.

A total of 20 grassroots administrative staff from secondary colleges across four local undergraduate universities were selected as interviewees. The data collection period for the survey interviews was from 2020 to 2021. The demographic characteristics of the participants are as follows: regarding gender, 11 were male and 9 were female; in terms of age distribution, 13 were between 30-40 years old, 3 were between 41-50, and 4 were over 50; concerning highest educational attainment, 3 held bachelor's degrees, 13 held master's degrees, and 4 held doctoral degrees. Participants were assigned a sample number from A1 to A20 sequentially based on interview timing. To ensure confidentiality, all identifying information, including names, has been anonymized (see Table 1).

Table 1: Introduction of research subjects

Province-University-Name	Gender	Age	Respondent's Discipline	Education	Employment Date	Remarks
G-M-A1	Male	41	Medical Science	Doctor	2015	Provinces and universities are abbreviated, with names uniformly listed as "A" followed by serial numbers.
G-M-A2	Female	37	Liberal Arts	Master	2015	
G-M-A3	Male	46	Science	Master	2011	
G-M-A4	Female	40	Medical Science	Doctor	2015	
G-M-A5	Female	35	Medical Science	Master	2016	
G-M-A6	Male	39	Medical Science	Doctor	2019	
G-M-A7	Male	37	Medical Science	Doctor	2017	
J-N-A8	Female	40	Liberal Arts	Bachelor	2020	
J-N-A9	Male	52	Liberal Arts	Master	2015	
J-N-A10	Male	50	Science	Master	2015	
J-N-A11	Female	38	Liberal Arts	Master	2017	
H-E-A12	Male	37	Law	Master	2014	
H-E-A13	Male	38	Economics	Master	2016	
H-E-A14	Male	37	Management	Master	2015	
H-E-A15	Female	40	Management	Master	2014	
G-O-A16	Male	50	Engineering	Bachelor	2017	
G-O-A17	Male	36	Engineering	Master	2015	
G-O-A18	Female	49	Liberal Arts	Master	2017	
G-O-A19	Female	32	Science	Master	2019	
G-O-A20	Female	51	Liberal Arts	Bachelor	2018	

2.2. Research Validity and Reliability

The trustworthiness of qualitative research, which operates without the standardized measurement tools, criteria, and theoretical frameworks typical of quantitative paradigms, is frequently debated, leading to a lack of consensus on issues of reliability and validity. Consequently, traditional quantitative assessment methods are often ill-suited for evaluating such process-oriented inquiry. This study addresses concerns of research validity, or trustworthiness, through several strategies.

From the researcher's perspective, the author shares the same professional role as the interviewees. This insider status facilitated a nuanced understanding of the participants' experiences, enabling the establishment of rapport and a relationship of trust. This environment encouraged interviewees to share more candid and reliable information. To ensure the integrity of the data, the following measures were implemented:

- Interview Efficacy: After identifying potential subjects, the research purpose was clearly

explained, and a formal invitation was extended. The interview guide was provided in advance via email or instant messaging. While the format remained flexible to allow for natural conversation, the focus was maintained on achieving the research objectives.

- **Data Integrity:** Meticulous care was taken to preserve the completeness of all collected interview materials to prevent data loss, thereby ensuring a rich and robust corpus of primary data for analysis. This study further enhanced its trustworthiness through methodological triangulation. Beyond in-depth interviews, the author conducted on-site observations in various workplaces. Data gathered from these different settings and contexts were subsequently compared and analyzed. Furthermore, on the basis of the initial purposive sample of 20 grassroots administrative personnel, an additional 20 administrative staff and faculty representatives were interviewed. This allowed for a more comprehensive comparison and verification of the data, strengthening the analytical findings.
- **Analysis of Research Data:** This study employed a bottom-up approach to qualitative data analysis, involving the processes of summarization and refinement. The analysis focused on identifying initial codes that were the most representative, significant, and frequently occurring. Through the classification, synthesis, and organization of the dataset, dispersed fragments of information were integrated into a coherent structure, forming distinct sub-categories. This foundation allowed for the distillation of theoretical insights from the research materials. The entire analytical procedure was structured into three stages, consistent with the grounded theory approach: initial/open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. This iterative process ensured the continuous refinement and condensation of the data.

Based on an in-depth analysis of the interview transcripts, this study constructed a model to represent the role dilemmas faced by grassroots administrative personnel, as presented in Figure 1. This model aims to elucidate the challenges and predicaments these personnel encounter in their practical work. It serves as a framework for gaining a deeper understanding of their current work situation and provides a theoretical foundation for developing strategies to improve their work environment and enhance operational efficiency. Throughout the analytical process, the researcher adhered to a rigorous and systematic protocol, with particular attention paid to the trustworthiness of the findings, as defined by their credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. This commitment to methodological rigor ensures that the research yields a robust and trustworthy account of the role dilemmas and potential adaptation strategies for university grassroots administrative staff.

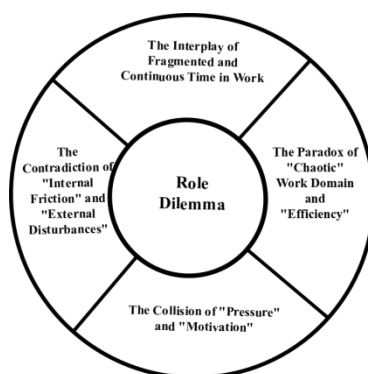


Figure 1: Model of role dilemma for grassroots administrative personnel.

2.3 Research Ethics

The project was gained approved from Medical Ethics Committee of Guangxi Medical University (Ref:KY20250414), and all participants were informed that their information would

remain strictly anonymous. Each participant provided written informed consent and retained the right to withdraw from the study at any point during data collection.

3. Results: Current Dilemmas of Grassroots Administrative Personnel Roles in Academic Departments

3.1. The Interplay of Fragmented and Continuous Time in Work

Table 2: On-site participatory observation record form

Event content	Theme	Participants	Date	Observation duration	Note
Reception work	Arrangements for visits from external organizations	G University, X Academy, A3 Teacher	June 10, 2022 (Wednesday)	(College office, meeting, school administrative building) AM 8:00-12:00	The activities are conducted simultaneously, with interludes that include impromptu work assignments by college leaders and consultations with college teachers.
Meeting organization	Research exchange seminar				
Sending and receiving messages	The delivery of the school's document notification(phone, QQ, email)				
Document writing	Using a computer to write various documents and create files.				
School survey	School inspection		June 10,2022 (Wednesday)	(College office, meeting, school administrative building) PM 2:00-5:30	
Sending and receiving school notices	The delivery of the school's document notification(phone, QQ, email)				
Write the documents for the college.	Speech by a leader, Institutional planning summary				
Arrange the placement of newly purchased equipment.	Set up new office equipment for teachers				
Contact the manufacturer for repairs if the air conditioner is damaged.	Handling teacher feedback issues				

Human existence is characterized by temporality. This perspective articulates the constitutive role of time in the structure of human being. For administrative staff inundated with diverse forms and notifications, their individual existence is disrupted by the fragmentation of externally imposed time. This reality represents a form of alienation stemming from temporal fragmentation; losing control over one's time is, in effect, equivalent to losing control over one's professional life and

sense of value.

To gather firsthand data, the researcher conducted field observations at selected sites, utilizing a structured observation form to record data. The research method was inspired by the ethnographic approach exemplified in *The Man in the President's Office* [13], which provides a detailed portrayal of a president's daily work, offering insights into the responsibilities and behavioral patterns of high-level administrators. This study adapts a similar methodological approach to examine the job responsibilities of grassroots administrative personnel.

By shadowing a college administrative staff member throughout a typical day, their work was observed to transition between various locations: the college office, meeting rooms, faculty offices, and university administration buildings (see Table 2). Their tasks encompassed a range of activities, including organizing meetings, answering phone calls, receiving superiors for inspections, and drafting documents, integrating both dynamic and static duties. Through the observation and narrative description of an office director's daily routine, the issues of temporal disorder and fragmentation confronting grassroots administrative staff become apparent. These temporal challenges significantly exacerbate their workload and contribute to role-related stress.

Administrative work is characterized by its fragmented and segmented nature, where in an individual's physical time is persistently encroached upon and disrupted. In general, human energy and temporal resources are fixed and finite; exceeding these natural limits challenges an individual's capacity to adapt. As Interviewee A19 articulated, "As long as I am in the college office, all my time is allocated to the college, including even my leisure time." This interviewee enumerated a myriad of routine tasks, such as conveying messages, drafting documents, managing assets, attending various committee meetings, organizing college events, accommodating inspections, and handling affairs for faculty and students—activities that collectively consume the majority of their time. "This problem is intractable," they noted, "because you cannot predict or control when other functional departments will issue notifications" (Data source: Interviewee G-O-A19).

The dispersion of objectives leads to a prolongation of tasks, forcing grassroots administrative staff to operate within a "pluralistic time framework" year after year. They must constantly navigate between disparate domains, each with its own distinct priorities and rhythms, while processing information from a multitude of sources. Consequently, these staff members are compelled into a perpetually reactive and fragmented mode of operation. Over time, this environment can only foster mechanical, superficial, and simplistic patterns of thinking and habitual responses. In the long term, the loss of control over one's time equates to a loss of autonomy. This, in turn, negates the value and significance of the "human" element within grassroots administrative structures, reducing individuals to mere functionaries within the system.

3.2. The Paradox of the "Chaotic" Work Domain and "Efficiency"

Clear internal boundaries within administrative organizations help to define methods and rules of action more distinctly, thereby reducing jurisdictional overlap and disputes. Such clarity is a fundamental condition for mitigating conflict. Theoretically, in university governance, administrative power and academic power operate under different systems and maintain relatively clear boundaries at both the institutional and faculty levels. Administrative power pertains to the management of administrative affairs, while academic power governs academic operations.

However, in practice, because both powers are embedded within the same institutional structure of colleges and universities, the theoretically distinct and non-overlapping relationship is difficult to maintain. The prevailing governance model leads to a blurring of functional boundaries. On the one hand, regarding work content, imperfect and incomplete university regulations and systems often result in unclear definitions of the rights and obligations of various groups or departments. Vague

jurisdictions lead to ambiguous division of labor and responsibilities. The proliferation of functional departments within the university increases the number of managers issuing commands and directives. Consequently, the responsibilities of grassroots administrative staff become increasingly complex, and their scope of work continues to expand amid a surplus of miscellaneous affairs. This "boundlessness" of the work domain extends continuously in both time and space. With the persistent intervention of external administrative forces, work becomes virtually limitless. On the other hand, despite ongoing efforts to integrate and streamline administrative institutions, serious human resource challenges persist within faculty and departmental administration. These include staff shortages and a lack of operational continuity. This creates a direct contradiction between the escalating volume of tasks and the insufficient human resources available to address them.

From the perspective of work efficiency requirements, the operational effectiveness of grassroots administrative staff is fundamental to the smooth functioning of a college. According to the characteristics of information transmission within university decision-making structures, without efficient administrative execution, the organization cannot achieve optimal decision-making or management efficiency. As Interviewee A13 stated, "There are still many imperfections in the construction of the system, and the mechanism is not sound, leading to our low work efficiency. For instance, processes for financial matters or bidding lack proper standardization. Many tasks rely on person-to-person communication, group-style approvals—each matter requiring individual application and leadership approval. This inevitably leads to minor issues in auditing responsibilities and rights. Human factors play a significant role, and changes are sometimes made arbitrarily" (Data source: Interviewee H-E-A13).

Thus, the complexity of work content, coupled with the high efficiency required for operational performance, constitutes a core role conflict for grassroots administrative staff. This paradox inevitably introduces numerous operational disadvantages for colleges and the wider university, objectively deviating from the original intention of establishing an efficient administrative hub. It reflects the complexity of "responsibilities" at the faculty level, which stands in stark contrast to the limited "executive power" actually held by its administration. This situation ultimately leads to the central contradictions faced by these staff: finite energy versus infinite responsibilities, and complex tasks paired with low efficiency expectations, thereby highlighting the insignificance of administrative "power" within the faculty structure.

3.3. The Collision of "Pressure" and "Motivation" in the Exercise of Academic Authority

University authority functions as a statutory and autonomous management power, operating above macro-level regulation. In contrast, faculties and departments, as micro-management entities, are subject to the redistribution of power and operate under the control and domination of the university level. Despite the complex entanglement of various interests in the distribution of academic power, faculties and departments maintain a role defined by the essential characteristics of the university itself. Following multiple layers of power distribution, the administrative authority of faculties and departments exists within the interstices of these divisions, characterized by repetition and overlap. Consequently, this authority scarcely retains the traditional substance or value of power.

Although the current university administrative system is structured as a bureaucracy that reinforces hierarchical consciousness, and while administrative positions often hold perceived status, faculty and departmental administrative bodies reside at the base of this pyramidal structure. This position inherently defines their operational attributes as obedient and passive. An examination of the responsibility list for administrative power within China's faculties and departments reveals that the duties of grassroots administrative personnel are primarily auxiliary. Their role is characterized

by conveying information between upper and lower levels and serving in a supportive capacity to the college. Their tasks are predominantly distributed and assigned by various administrative bodies at the university level. Indeed, the responsibility list for these grassroots administrators is itself issued by the university's administrative functional departments. Consequently, administrative bodies at the college level are often preoccupied with completing tasks mandated by the university, where power is centrally concentrated. Thus, grassroots administrative personnel effectively become distributors and implementers of tasks, acting as a secondary link in the operational chain. The secondary colleges operate akin to "production workshops" of the university, required to obediently fulfill various directives. This dynamic is encapsulated by Teacher A3's statement: "Today I have completed several tasks. I will go to the university's functional departments to 'submit my homework,' and then I can clock off" (Source: Interviewee G-M-A3).

From content to nature, the work manifests a clear hierarchy of leadership and subordination, dominance and obedience. The subject of authority, the source of tasks, the distribution path, the execution procedures, and the implementation process for grassroots administrative personnel collectively determine the passive characteristics of faculty and departmental administration. Clark observes that "the divergence between administrative culture and the culture of faculty and students, though seldom acknowledged, has become increasingly central to the structure of academic institutions" [14]. Grassroots administrative personnel are subject to interactive domination and intervention from various levels, forcing them to passively accept control from multiple power factions. A common explanation for occupational burnout is the absence of sufficiently challenging tasks in one's employment [15]. This prevents them from maximizing their organizational efficiency, ultimately leading to imbalanced and disordered operations within faculties and departments.

3.4. The Contradiction of "Internal Friction" and "External Disturbances" for Grassroots Administrative Staff in Faculties and Departments

From the perspective of administrative management characteristics, the organizational structure of universities aligns with a bureaucratic management model. This model is characterized by top-down issuance of orders, which facilitates communication and reinforces the authority and directives of senior leadership. It constitutes a rule-bound organizational system featuring a mature division of responsibilities and a strict hierarchy based on obedience [16]. Conversely, academic power represents the core functional carrier of higher education institutions. As Burton Clark noted, "When we look into the internal structure of the higher education system to analyze the university organization, we find that the main body of the university is composed of groups of scholars with professional knowledge, and the basis for the aggregation of these scholars is the form established by the academic organization" [17].

Thus, within faculties and departments, two operational systems coexist and interact: the free, discursive atmosphere inherent to academic power and the obedient, hierarchical authority of administrative power. The university's organizational structure has evolved into a highly complex entity. When analyzed from the perspective of its core operations and fundamental values, it is primarily composed of two major systems [18]. The relationship between these systems—the academic and the administrative—is depicted in Figure 2. This interplay creates a fundamental contradiction for grassroots administrative staff, who must navigate the internal friction generated by these competing systems while also managing external disturbances, determining whether the structure acts as a boost or a barrier to effective university governance.

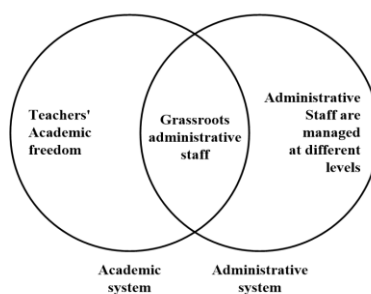


Figure 2: Academic and administrative systems of the department.

Within the higher education system, administrative power is fundamentally intended to serve academic power. In practice, however, the administrative power of faculties and departments is subordinate to the arrangements and deployments made by the university's central functional departments. This subordination dictates that faculty-level administration must primarily comply with and execute top-down directives. Consequently, the execution of these higher-level orders and the fulfillment of routine duties often interfere with the operation of academic power, making it difficult to cultivate a free and open academic atmosphere within faculties and departments.

As Teacher A15 observed: "The resources and conditions allocated by the university are always limited. Information is conveyed through administrative staff, who serve as intermediaries. Academic staff, not having access to the primary source of information, are often unclear about the university's intentions and do not understand the constraints and contradictions faced by administrators in communication and resource distribution. Therefore, some teachers complain that notifications are too urgent, too numerous, and often unreasonable. When administrative staff convey these directives, they feel they are delaying or interfering with teaching and research. Teachers, in turn, feel they are being treated unreasonably, and their academic freedom is threatened. As a result, it is inevitable that academic staff will adopt an indifferent and perfunctory attitude towards the actions or decisions of administrative staff. These phenomena have exacerbated the rift between academic and administrative personnel." (Source: Interviewee H-E-A15)

This dynamic reflects what Baldwin identified as the political nature of universities: "The complex organizations in universities can be regarded as important political systems, where each represents the values and dynamics of different interest groups, and different values form contradictions and conflicts due to different concepts" [19]. Thus, grassroots administrative staff in faculties and departments face a fundamental paradox: they are the implementers and executors of the university's mandates, yet they also become unwitting contributors to the disruption of the college's academic environment. This dual role creates a situation where contradictions and conflicts not only coexist but operate concurrently within the realm of faculty and departmental administration.

4. Discussion

4.1 Analysis of the Causes of the Dilemma Faced by Grassroots Administrative Staff

4.1.1. Diversified Co-governance: The Impact of the External Governance Environment under Government-Market-Societal Regulation

The role of grassroots administrative staff is profoundly shaped by the external governance environment. The term "governance" originates from Latin and Ancient Greek, originally meaning to control, guide, and manipulate. In political science, it constitutes a key concept referring to the

coordinated control exercised by autonomous yet interdependent actors through both external authority and internal self-regulating mechanisms [20]. As the scale of colleges and universities continues to expand, their operational autonomy has increased to some extent. Nevertheless, the governance pattern, predominantly led and managed by the government, remains fundamentally unchanged. Higher education institutions continue to be significantly influenced by the "organizational habits" of government agencies. This influence stems primarily from the exogenous characteristics of university organizations. Exogeneity manifests the fundamental logic of governmental "support and control" over the organizational structures of colleges and universities [21]. Furthermore, the organizational goals of these institutions often exhibit exogenous and heteronomous qualities. As social embedded entities, universities inevitably reflect external social management models in their internal operations. As Scott emphasizes, "Organizations are not closed systems, isolated from their external environment, but remain open to and dependent upon resources and personnel originating outside their own system" [22]. When market and societal forces lack sufficient strength, governmental dominance continues to play a decisive role.

Within the organizational field of universities, the boundaries between university organizations, government, market, and society demonstrate distinct mechanisms and characteristics. The government's influence mechanism is characterized by directionality and guidance, urging universities to align with fundamental public values and legal frameworks. Societal influence operates through guidance and negotiation, while market forces affect universities through interest-oriented mechanisms that shape program development and academic direction. These external influences collectively constitute the external ecological environment of university organizations. Consequently, the interests, value pursuits, and evaluation standards of various stakeholder groups become increasingly complex and diverse. Different groups tend to make judgments based on their own value standards and evaluative positions, transforming universities into arenas of complex contradictions. This multifaceted external environment ultimately shapes the role requirements and behavioral expectations for grassroots administrative staff within university settings.

4.1.2. Power Struggle: The Impact of the Complex Internal Structure of the Higher Education System

The higher education system constitutes a complex academic ecosystem. Within this system, the emergence of full-time administrative personnel in universities has created a distinction between academic and administrative staff, giving rise to inherent tensions and conflicts. Furthermore, due to the distinctive administrative characteristics of Chinese higher education institutions, a pattern of multiple coexisting authorities has developed. This structure operates on the basis of academic and administrative personnel as its primary operational components.

The development of the higher education system has established an authoritative political power structure. At the university level, a "parallel operation of two committees" system has been implemented. When professional ethical standards conflict with bureaucratic regulations, academic ideological norms take precedence [23]. For grassroots administrative staff within college organizations, this situation places them at the intersection of academic administration and leadership. Consequently, they become embedded within a complex weave of internal administrative, academic, and political power structures within universities, as illustrated in Figure 3 (the internal administrative-academic-political power structure diagram). This pluralistic governance approach within universities subjects grassroots administrative staff to multiple layers of oversight and management. Divergent directives from these various systems create substantial pressure on these staff members, ultimately leading to significant role dilemmas for grassroots administrative personnel within college organizations.



Figure 3: Diagram of the internal administrative-academic-political power structure of universities.

4.1.3. Practical Choices: The Impact of Administrative Logic in Higher Education Institutions

China's current higher education system is built upon an administrative framework established in the 1950s, which was directly derived from the governmental administrative system. Within higher education institutions, this structure manifests through the division of functional departments and the stratification of administrative personnel according to government-defined administrative levels.

As Chinese universities originally emerged to meet societal development needs and initially operated under strong governmental centralized control, they are fundamentally characterized as state-directed institutions. Consequently, university administrative organizations bear not only the responsibility of managing institutional affairs but also the authority to execute government-mandated responsibilities. All administrative personnel within universities are interlinked within a hierarchical chain of command. Through this power hierarchy, grassroots administrative staff effectively become the terminal point in this chain, subject to management and directives from higher administrative levels.

For grassroots administrative personnel in constituent colleges, this system and its inherent authority exert particularly pronounced multi-level pressures. Unlike other administrative staff within the university system, these grassroots personnel face distinctive dilemmas arising from their unique position at the intersection of institutional and governmental mandates.

4.1.4. Loose and Ambiguous: The Impact of University Organizational Attributes

University organizations comprise various departments, each possessing distinct characteristics, functions, and boundaries. Although these departments are structurally combined, their interdependence remains weak and minimal, resulting in a state of organizational dynamics characterized more by disorder than order. The connections between personnel and institutional units are typically loose rather than closely integrated.

This loosely-coupled nature of university organizations manifests in two primary challenges: difficulty in coordinating management processes and limited capacity to implement systemic changes. As Clark Kerr observed in *The Uses of the University*, "The university has evolved from a small village inhabited by monks to a small town of intellectuals, and today it has become a vast and changing city." Modern universities, hosting multiple organizations with conflicting values and missions, consequently experience what might be termed "organizational indigestion." In an open and complex organizational system, the formation of organizational structure does not converge incrementally toward a single configuration [24]; Organizational structural inertia, manifesting as resistance to change, intensifies with the complexity of the structure [25].

Within the university's organizational system, increasing specialization of knowledge and growing interconnections among internal units lead to more diverse, ambiguous, and often alienated

institutional goals. These ambiguous objectives result in unclear organizational boundaries and responsibilities, generating conflicts and contradictions. Furthermore, the barriers between different organizational units hinder effective cooperation, ultimately impeding the holistic development of the university.

4.2. Pathways: The Way Out for Role Adjustment of Grassroots Administrative Staff

4.2.1. Shift from Process Management to Goal-Oriented Management

Schools and colleges should accordingly transition from traditional process management to goal-oriented management. At the beginning of each academic year, institutions should hold comprehensive discussions to establish clear tasks and objectives in key areas including teaching, scientific research, student development, and discipline construction. These goals, after deliberation and approval by the university's academic committee and relevant governance bodies, should serve as the institution's annual targets, accompanied by the formulation of appropriate rules and regulations. While rules and regulations inherently possess normative and constraining functions, they also play coordinating and sometimes obstructive roles. They can simultaneously motivate and limit efforts, maintaining stability while potentially impeding adaptive change [26]. The establishment of scientific regulations therefore carries significant positive implications for institutional effectiveness. Duderstadt emphasizes, "The ultimate aim of any initiative designed to achieve institutional transformation is not merely to accomplish a specific set of objectives, but more importantly, to cultivate a capability, accumulate momentum, ignite passion, and foster a sense of mission that empowers courageous advancement toward grand future visions" [27].

In this transitional process, central administration should avoid excessive interference in college operations, allowing appropriate autonomy at the departmental level. College administrative systems should subsequently refine the institution's goal management framework by developing detailed objectives aligned with departmental missions, implementing reminder and supervision mechanisms, clarifying the respective responsibilities of academic and administrative functions, and establishing comprehensive responsibility management lists. The institutionalization of accountability mechanisms functions not merely as a system of constraints but also as a catalyst for economic efficiency [28]. Through the implementation of goal-oriented management at the institutional level, task interference with grassroots administrative staff can be substantially reduced. This approach correspondingly diminishes miscellaneous assignments for frontline administrators and mitigates tensions between academic and administrative functions within colleges and departments.

4.2.2. Optimize Administrative Structure and Implement Flat Management

Current responsibility lists for faculty and department administration reveal significant issues of overlapping management and excessive administrative burdens. Introducing flat management principles into university administrative systems can effectively eliminate multi-headed management of administrative functions and substantially improve the management efficiency of grassroots administrative staff.

At the institutional level, universities should engage in comprehensive strategic planning and top-level design based on their actual educational context. This requires a holistic consideration of the administrative management system and systematic optimization of organizational structures. By streamlining and integrating administrative levels with similar responsibilities, the implementation of flat management facilitates more effective communication and implementation of institutional vision, while rationalizing work processes and clarifying operational methodologies.

4.2.3. Streamline Administration and Decentralize Authority to Empower Grassroots Management

Once institutional macro-objectives are established, colleges emerge as the primary entities responsible for implementation. The effective operation of grassroots departments serves as a fundamental requirement for high-quality university development. A. Bartlett Giamatti, former President of Yale University, asserted that “collegial culture constitutes a system of shared values and ought to be regarded as the most precious asset common to all institutions of higher learning” [29]. Consequently, the focus of university governance should shift from centralized administrative systems toward the operational mechanisms of colleges and departments, reflecting the necessary evolution from a “modern university system” to a “modern college system” [30].

Critical decision-making authority should be positioned at the college level, as this tier possesses the most comprehensive understanding of specific disciplinary contexts and operational realities. Through systematic decentralization, universities should empower colleges to make autonomous decisions tailored to their actual conditions—including determining enrollment targets and faculty recruitment based on specific developmental needs. Granting autonomy in academic domains including teaching, research, and discipline construction can significantly enhance the vitality and operational efficiency of grassroots administrative staff. Rather than remaining passive executors preoccupied with responding to multiple directives from various upper-level functional departments, these staff members can focus on serving the academic development and innovation within their respective colleges. This transformation not only elevates service philosophy and operational standards but also unlocks greater developmental potential and enables the cultivation of exceptional latent capabilities.

4.2.4. Establish an Administrative Operation Model Centered on Academic Scholarship

Burton Clark observed that “the main force shaping the work and life of leading scholars is the discipline rather than the institution in which they are located” [17]. This distinctive characteristic of higher education institutions fundamentally shapes their academic organization. Disciplinary structures influence and determine management practices and labor divisions within universities, thereby defining the essential attributes and operational divisions within grassroots colleges.

Within academic colleges, organizational structures coalesce around disciplinary foundations. Consequently, centering administrative operations on scholarship represents an essential approach for developing effective responsibility frameworks. Strengthening decision-making mechanisms based on academic authority—such as professor-led governance—ensures institutional operations remain focused on academic excellence, student development, and scholarly advancement. This scholarly-centered approach simplifies administrative processes, reduces external administrative interference, and diminishes tendencies toward administrative domination over academic departments.

By constructing grassroots colleges with academic power as the core foundation, political power providing directional guidance, and administrative power offering service support, institutions enable academic leaders to assume crucial roles in institutional management and decision-making. The development of responsibility frameworks for grassroots administrative staff should consequently prioritize support for academic functions, thereby enhancing the scientific rigor and practical feasibility of university management and decision-making processes. This operational model ensures that college administrative structures effectively protect and promote the development and flourishing of scholarship, thereby providing substantial support for the advancement of academic excellence.

5. Conclusions

In conclusion, the role dilemmas of grassroots administrative staff are not isolated personnel issues but symptomatic of deeper systemic contradictions within the governance model of Chinese universities. The current structure, characterized by excessive bureaucratic hierarchy, blurred boundaries, and a misalignment between administrative and academic logics, stifles efficiency and innovation at the departmental level. The proposed solutions are interconnected and advocate for a holistic transformation. Empowering colleges through decentralization and goal-setting, flattening administrative structures, and fundamentally reorienting administration to serve scholarship are not merely operational adjustments but necessary prerequisites for achieving modern university governance. Ultimately, enhancing the efficacy and status of grassroots administrative staff is critical to unlocking the vitality of secondary colleges, which is essential for the high-quality development of China's higher education system as a whole. Success hinges on moving from a model of centralized control to one of empowered service, aligning administrative functions directly with the core academic mission of the university.

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