

An Incentive Study of Office Directors in University Colleges from a Two-Factor Theory Perspective: A Case Study of L Normal University

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How to cite this paper: Pan, K. D. (2025). An Incentive Study of Office Directors in University Colleges from a Two-Factor Theory Perspective: A Case Study of L Normal University. *Open Journal of Social Sciences*, 13, 183-190.
<https://doi.org/10.4236/jss.2025.1312014>

Received: November 4, 2025
Accepted: December 15, 2025
Published: December 18, 2025

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Abstract

Office directors of university secondary colleges serve as pivotal intermediaries in comprehensive administrative management, bridging upper and lower levels while providing educational administration and administrative support for core functions, including teaching, research, and social services. Their professional attitudes, educational management practices, and service quality significantly influence the daily operations of academic institutions. This study employs the Two-Factor Theory to scientifically examine its motivational framework for university administrators. By analyzing current challenges and operational realities, the paper proposes incentive measures through two categories: hygiene factors (clarifying job responsibilities, optimizing staffing, stabilizing performance-based compensation) and motivators (implementing competency development programs for mid-level administrators, piloting the “Dual-Track System”, and enhancing AI tool adoption). These strategies aim to strengthen the talent development of office directors in university secondary colleges.

Keywords

Two-Factor Theory, University, Office Director, Motivation

1. Introduction

The report of the 20th National Congress of the Communist Party of China proposed “improving the school management and education evaluation system” (Li & Deng, 2023). College-level departments in universities, which undertake core tasks such as teaching, research, and social services, serve as a microcosm of modernizing educational governance. In 2013, China’s Ministry of Education catego-

rized university staff into three groups: teaching personnel, administrative personnel, and support staff, with administrative personnel specifically referring to those engaged in administrative management or party affairs work (Zhou, 2022). Office directors of college-level departments (hereinafter referred to as “office directors”) represent a highly representative group in university administration. Internally, they are responsible for comprehensive management, serving faculty and students, and coordinating interdepartmental work. Externally, they implement operational directives from university departments, acting as the “last mile” in policy execution. However, they face challenges such as “uneven power-responsibility distribution, limited promotion opportunities, ambiguous status, and low job satisfaction.” The 2022 “Construction Standards for Party and Government Offices in Ordinary Higher Education Institutions (Trial)” by the Ministry of Education first included office directors in the “key minority” category, yet supporting systems remain underdeveloped. Against the backdrop of advancing educational governance modernization in universities, how to motivate this group through scientific theories has become a crucial research topic. The Two-Factor Theory’s “hygiene and motivation” dual framework offers a new perspective to resolve the dilemma of wanting the horse to run without making it eat grass. This study selects L Normal University as a case study to highlight its typicality rather than uniqueness. As a provincial public normal university, L Normal University shares highly similar management systems and office position challenges with other institutions of its kind. In addition, as a person who has experienced the positions firsthand, it is possible to obtain primary and authentic data.

2. Two-Factor Theory and Motivation

The Two-Factor Theory, also known as the “Motivation-Hygiene Theory,” is a motivational framework proposed by American psychologist Frederick Herzberg in 1959. He categorized workplace factors into two types: motivators and hygiene factors. Motivators, defined as elements related to job content itself—such as achievement, recognition, promotions, and career growth—satisfy employees’ needs for self-actualization, foster satisfaction, and stimulate initiative. Hygiene factors, on the other hand, pertain to work environment conditions like compensation, workplace atmosphere, interpersonal relationships, and company policies. When these factors reach intolerable levels, they trigger dissatisfaction (Zhou, 2022). While satisfying hygiene factors can alleviate negative emotions, they do not inherently motivate employees. The core principle of the Two-Factor Theory can be summarized as: Only motivators create genuine satisfaction, while hygiene factors merely eliminate dissatisfaction (Cai & Liao, 2021).

3. Applicability Analysis of the Two-Factor Theory

The Two-Factor Theory was proposed based on engineers and accountants engaged in mental work, so it is feasible to apply the Two-Factor Theory to the research of university administrators who also engage in mental work (Yuan, 2024).

Hertzberg's research revealed that "the factors contributing to employee satisfaction differ from those causing dissatisfaction in the workplace" (Herzberg et al., 2016). Satisfaction and dissatisfaction are not coexisting on a single continuum, but are distinctly separate. Regarding motivational factors, the antithesis of "satisfaction" should be "absence of satisfaction" rather than "dissatisfaction"; for hygiene factors, the counterpart to "dissatisfaction" is "absence of dissatisfaction" rather than "satisfaction".

The core function of hygiene factors lies in preventing "dissatisfaction" rather than treating it; motivational factors not only maintain but also enhance "satisfaction". The relationship between hygiene factors, motivator, satisfaction level, and motivation level is illustrated in **Figure 1** (Wang, 2021).

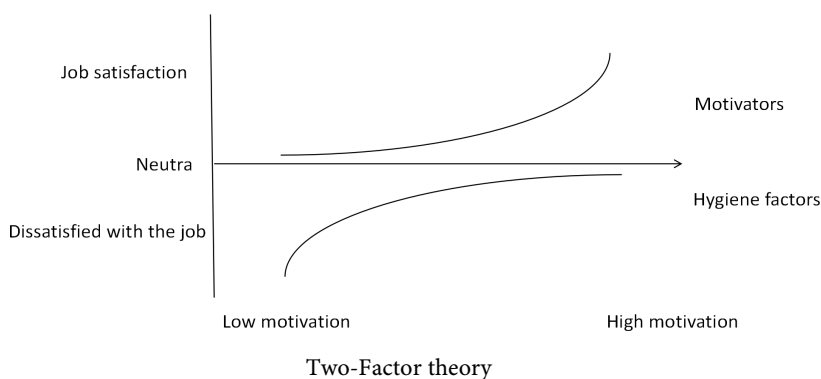


Figure 1. Two-Factor theory diagram.

4. The Current Situation of the Director of the Office of the Secondary College under the Perspective of the Two-Factor Theory

The article conducted interviews with 20 office directors of the secondary colleges at L Normal University, and formulated relevant questions based on the classification.

4.1. Hygiene Factor

4.1.1. Unclear Job Responsibilities

"Like a thousand needles in the body, a single thread in the head." Office directors not only manage faculty and students internally while coordinating departmental operations, but also serve as gatekeepers for administrative directives from the university's functional departments and Party affairs offices. In some cases, data silos between departments persist, leading to redundant submissions of information or supporting documents. Interviews reveal that nearly every secondary college at L Normal University has appointed a full-time Party building organizer, with some holding section-level, deputy division-level, or division-level positions. However, practical implementation often faces challenges due to undefined responsibilities among the Party Committee Organization Department, Publicity Department, and secondary colleges. This ambiguity frequently results in admin-

istrative tasks originally assigned to the Party Committee being passed back to the office directors of secondary colleges.

4.1.2. Inadequate Staffing

In the staffing of secondary college offices at universities, a case study of L Normal University reveals that while office directors are appointed, clerical staff in each secondary college office are predominantly short-term contract workers. The staff's professional competence varies significantly, with some positions being preferential arrangements. For instance, spouses and children of faculty members often hold part-time bachelor's degrees, and many lack initiative in professional development and service enhancement. Interviews further indicate that both clerical staff in university-level administrative departments and those in secondary college offices lack a performance evaluation system with clear promotion and demotion criteria.

4.1.3. Performance-Based Distribution Is Not Sound

The performance-based incentive system fundamentally operates through a dual-regulation mechanism of "rewarding excellence and addressing underperformance" to achieve coordinated enhancement of organizational efficiency and individual development. Interviews revealed that during the annual comprehensive performance evaluation at L Normal University, department-level administrators are directly allocated performance bonuses by the university without participating in the distribution of bonuses from their affiliated secondary units. Furthermore, department heads, section chiefs, and clerks in the university's functional departments receive monthly direct payments from the institution. In contrast, office directors in secondary colleges, despite being classified as administrative staff, are required to compete with full-time faculty members in research performance evaluations. This creates heightened anxiety for office directors who are already at a disadvantage in academic research.

4.2. Motivators

4.2.1. Few Opportunities for Training Outside

Training programs can be categorized into pre-service training, on-the-job training, and specialized training. Interviews revealed that department heads at secondary colleges typically participate in external exchanges or professional development opportunities each semester, including training at prestigious universities or attending specialized workshops. In contrast, the office director at secondary colleges attended only one pre-service training session during their four-year tenure, with no participation in on-the-job training or external programs. This lack of engagement not only limited their professional growth but also prevented them from broadening their perspectives or adopting advanced educational management concepts.

4.2.2. Narrow Career Development Channels

The career advancement pathways remain unclear. For administrative staff, the

difficulty in obtaining professional title evaluations is a widespread issue, with no corresponding career progression channels available (Liu, 2020). According to L Normal University's professional title evaluation regulations, only full-time teachers and technical professionals are eligible for annual title reviews. Office directors, as administrative personnel, are excluded from these annual evaluations. However, interviews reveal that at South China Normal University—a Guangdong provincial normal institution—administrative staff can participate in internal higher education research series evaluations. This significantly enhances their professional development and reduces dissatisfaction with administrative roles. Additionally, the “position pyramid” structure also profoundly influences administrative personnel's work attitudes.

4.2.3. Limited Vision of Job Cognition

Under the impetus of China's national smart education strategy, higher education institutions face dual challenges: digital transformation and governance restructuring. With its newly granted master's degree-granting authority, L Normal University has entered a new phase of development characterized by “expanding master's programs, ascending to university status, and pursuing doctoral authorization.” Amidst these digital transitions and institutional elevation, administrative staff are required to demonstrate increasingly sophisticated professional competencies and strategic vision. Yet office directors remain bogged down in routine tasks, with fewer opportunities for overseas exchanges compared to faculty members. A high-caliber management team must possess solid professional expertise, proficiency in office software, effective time management, and strong communication skills. Consequently, inadequate problem-solving acumen and limited capabilities will hinder organizational advancement (Zu, 2019).

5. Ways to Strengthen the Team Building of College Office Directors in Universities

From the perspective of the Two-Factor Theory, merely addressing the various needs of office managers does not automatically enhance job satisfaction and motivation. It is crucial to clearly define the scope and boundaries between hygiene factors and motivators (Chen & Yang, 2025). Confusing these boundaries—mistaking hygiene needs for motivational tools, or overemphasizing incentives while neglecting hygiene deficiencies—can lead to diminished motivational effectiveness or even counterproductive outcomes.

5.1. Improve Hygiene Factors and Avoid “Dissatisfaction”

5.1.1. Clarify the Responsibilities of the Office Director

As a pivotal link in the governance structure of higher education institutions, the clarity of the office director's responsibilities directly impacts organizational efficiency and policy implementation. Given the current push for full-time Party building organizers in secondary colleges, it's crucial to establish institutional frameworks that precisely delineate roles between office directors and Party build-

ing organizers, preventing “collaborative inertia” caused by overlapping responsibilities or gaps in accountability. Specifically, the university’s Party Committee Organization Department should lead in clarifying Party building organizers’ duties, while secondary college Party committees need to refine operational requirements. This involves: 1) Defining clear responsibilities between office directors and Party building organizers; 2) Enhancing performance evaluation standards to strengthen institutional constraints while stimulating internal motivation.

5.1.2. Strengthen Office Staffing

As the “last mile” in implementing Party and government decisions, the staffing intensity and structural rationality of college offices directly determine governance efficiency. With the deepening of “Party building leading and all-round education,” functions of the university office have evolved from traditional administrative functions to become integrated hubs coordinating Party building, teaching, research, and student affairs. This transformation requires higher standards for personnel quantity, competency levels, and professional backgrounds. Multiple university management documents and studies emphasize that college offices must establish full-time directors, secretaries, and staff members. Through open competitive recruitment and performance evaluations, they should ensure proper personnel-job matching and achieve quality-driven efficiency.

5.1.3. Improve the Performance Appraisal and Distribution Plan

The role of a college office director in higher education institutions is characterized by “broad scope, high complexity of administrative tasks, and difficulty in quantifiable evaluation.” It is recommended that during annual performance assessment and bonus distribution, these directors be categorized under university-level department heads and administrative managers in functional departments. This approach ensures stable basic income through direct performance-based bonus allocation.

5.2. Strengthen Motivators to Boost “Satisfaction”

5.2.1. Carry out the Project of Improving the Ability of Cadres with the Help of Group Assistance from Universities

According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory, every individual has the need for self-development. The “Group-style” talent support program for higher education in Guangdong Province, initiated in 2018 by the Organization Department of the Guangdong Provincial Committee and the Provincial Education Working Committee, aims to promote coordinated regional development and advance higher education in eastern, western, and northern Guangdong. Under the third round of this program, L Normal University leveraged the talent cultivation, cadre management, and research service advantages of South China Normal University—a “Double First-Class” institution—to implement a “Capacity Enhancement Project” for its administrative cadres from 2025 to 2026. Each semester, office directors and department heads from secondary colleges were dispatched to South China Normal University for specialized training and on-the-job learning. This

initiative significantly broadened the horizons of office directors, enhanced their work perspectives, and fostered the growth of administrative cadres.

5.2.2. Pilot the “Double Ladder System” to Open up a Horizontal Promotion Mechanism for Administrative Personnel

In higher education institutions, comparing full-time faculty members with administrative staff holding master’s degrees reveals distinct career trajectories. Full-time faculty typically become teaching assistants within their first year, advance to lecturer positions after two years, and attain senior academic titles after five years. Conversely, administrative staff with master’s degrees follow a different timeline: they start as clerical staff after one year, compete for deputy section-level positions after three years, vie for section-level roles after three years, and only reach deputy division-level positions after three years. This extended timeline for administrative staff to attain division-level leadership positions significantly outpaces the progression of faculty members toward senior academic titles. Moreover, unlike counselors who can only advance through official promotions, office directors in university departments have limited opportunities for professional advancement. To boost office directors’ motivation and job satisfaction, universities could implement a “dual-track system” pilot program. (Liu, 2020; Lin, 2021) Beyond regular administrative promotions, office directors could pursue academic career progression through the Higher Education Research Series: Research Intern → Assistant Researcher → Associate Researcher → Full Researcher. This dual-track approach would enhance their professional identity and sense of achievement in administrative roles.

5.2.3. Strengthen AI Tool Learning to Improve Your Professional Level

People’s deepest work motivation stems from personal accomplishment and self-development achieved through fulfilling job responsibilities (Chen & Yang, 2025). In the context of AI being deeply embedded in higher education governance ecosystems, administrative managers’ professional competence must be enhanced through a dual-driven approach of “theory and technology”. First, it is essential to transcend experience-based limitations by extensively learning multidisciplinary knowledge including administrative management, psychology, and sociology to improve theoretical literacy. Second, practical job scenarios should serve as experimental grounds to integrate theoretical knowledge with practice, innovate work methods, and optimize management processes and service quality. Third, proactive mastery of generative AI and data governance tools is crucial to embed algorithmic thinking into daily office operations, reducing transactional time costs. On one hand, the school administration can organize secondary college offices to participate in learning and applying large-scale generative AI models such as DeepSeek, Zhipu Qingyan, KIMI, and Doubao, fostering human-machine collaboration and supporting personal growth. On the other hand, AI empowerment can standardize office administrative tasks, transform routine work into standardized projects, and streamline project workflows, shifting office operations from

experience-driven to system-driven paradigms, thereby enhancing job satisfaction.

6. Conclusion

The role of office director in higher education institutions has long been characterized by ambiguous positioning and insufficient recognition, with both material incentives and career advancement opportunities needing improvement. Research indicates that focusing solely on hygiene factors can temporarily alleviate dissatisfaction, yet fails to cultivate genuine satisfaction. Conversely, overemphasizing motivational factors alone proves ineffective when hygiene needs are neglected. Building on school-based research, this paper proposes three targeted measures to enhance satisfaction and address dissatisfaction through coordinated hygiene and motivational approaches. These case-based strategies aim to provide practical references for future incentive research of office directors in university. It is recommended that university policymakers pay attention to both hygiene factors and motivators simultaneously in talent management reforms to achieve comprehensive optimization.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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