

Doing It All: Exploring Roles and Responsibilities of and Support for Online Program Coordinators

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Abstract

Academic program coordinators are one of the more common administrative positions in higher education in the United States. However, there are very few studies on program coordinators, particularly those who oversee online programs. This is a critical position at institutions that has not been formalized and is under-researched. Therefore, the purpose of the study was to explore the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators and the support they receive and need. Sixteen online program coordinators were interviewed from across institutions of higher education in the United States. The findings suggest that the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators are not consistent. They included duties such as enrollment management, curriculum and program infrastructure, faculty support, student support, personnel-related tasks, and “other duties as assigned.” Types of support also vary such as emotional support, workload support from others, and receiving incentives for the work. Sometimes these types of support are not effective. Online program coordinators want to have recognition from administration for the workload involved in the role, compensation for the work, additional resources, and more training and mentoring. Implications for practice and research are also discussed.

Keywords: Program coordinator, program director, online programs, higher education, faculty roles and responsibilities

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Academic program coordinators represent one of the most common faculty administrative appointments in higher education (Ingle et al., 2020). However, as noted in multiple studies, program coordinators lack both formal authority (Ingle et al., 2020; Marshall et al., 2021; Rost & Hover, 2022) and an official job description with a clearly defined list of responsibilities (Rost & Hover, 2022). These responsibilities have been documented in existing research in educational leadership (Coleman & Reames, 2020; Hackmann & Wanat, 2008, 2016; Ingle et al., 2020; Ingle et al., 2018; Reames, 2016) and higher education student affairs (Olt et al., 2026; Shelton et al., 2025), where most of the research has been conducted.

Unfortunately, there is a dearth in the literature regarding program coordinators who oversee online programs. Hoey and McCracken (2021) noted that the lack of research is surprising given the importance of the role and called for research to be done specifically with online program directors. Peterson et al. (2017) also noted that despite the critical importance, the position of the program director has not been fully formed or institutionalized and is under-researched. Therefore, the current study looks across disciplines and institutional types, but specifically within online programs. The purpose of the study is to explore the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators and the support they need. The following research questions are the foundation for this study:

1. What are the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators?
2. What kinds of support do online program coordinators receive and what support do they need?

Literature Review

The following section reviews the literature on online program coordinators in higher education, and specifically, their role and responsibilities, the support they receive, and challenges they encounter.

Defining Program Coordinator

There is not a consistent title for those faculty who also manage programs, either at the undergraduate or graduate level. Director (Ortega, 2003; Petersen et al., 2017; Wiener & Peterson, 2019) and coordinator (Coleman & Reames, 2020; Hackmann & Wanat, 2008) are the two most common titles. This paper will use “program coordinator” for consistency, except where the original work from cited authors uses a different title.

As Ingle et al. (2020) noted, the program coordinator represents one of the most common faculty administrative appointments in higher education. Program coordinators may also be responsible for research, teaching, and other service requirements. They are typically embedded in the programs in which they teach.

Program Coordinator Responsibilities

Current research notes that most coordinators do not have an official job description (Rost & Hover, 2022). Therefore, they do not have a clearly defined list of responsibilities. However, existing research studies in educational leadership (Coleman & Reames, 2020;

Hackmann & Wanat, 2008, 2016; Ingle et al., 2018; Ingle et al., 2020; Reames, 2016) and higher education student affairs (Olt et al., 2026; Shelton et al., 2025) have looked at the range of job duties. Hackmann and Wanat (2016) identified that the duties included,

serving as the program's point of contact, maintaining a vision of the program, guiding curricular revisions, leading regular program meetings, coordinating student recruitment and admissions, determining faculty course teaching assignments, addressing student concerns, fulfilling state and national accreditation requirements, and representing the program within the institution and with constituent groups. (p. 102)

Other studies have identified similar responsibilities with assessment and accreditation (Hackmann & Malin, 2016; Hackmann & Wanat, 2008; Parkes et al., 2023), admissions (Wiener & Peterson, 2019), recruitment and retention (Ingle & Marshall, 2024; Petersen et al., 2017; Wiener & Peterson, 2019), curriculum-related items (Coleman & Reames, 2020; Hackmann & Malin, 2016; Hackmann & Wanat, 2008; Ingle & Marshall, 2024; Wiener & Peterson, 2019), contingent faculty (Ingle & Marshall, 2024), student advising (Ingle & Marshall, 2024; Wiener & Peterson, 2019), building external partnerships (Ingle & Marshall, 2024), and representing the program on various committees (Ingle & Marshall, 2024; Wiener & Peterson, 2019).

In fields where curricula need to be revised to comply with new legislation (i.e., educational leadership or K-12 educator prep programs) or where the programs have partnerships with school district or community partners, additional workload compounds existing job responsibilities (Coleman & Reames, 2020; Jones & Lewis, 2024; Marshall et al., 2021).

Program Coordinator Support and Challenges

As noted in previous studies, support can come in different forms, such as a course release or some type of financial compensation (Hackmann & Wanat, 2016; Ingle et al., 2018, 2020). In a survey conducted by Ingle et al. (2020), faculty also received support through clerical support or graduate assistant support to assist in the program coordination tasks. The majority of program directors at UCEA-member institutions received one course reduction (46.7%) per academic year and over 60% received 1-3 reductions per academic year; however, 33.7% did not receive any reductions in teaching. Bieber et al. (2024) also found there was a “lack of negotiated release time from other responsibilities” (p. 41).

In Ingle et al.'s (2020) study, the majority of program directors did not receive a stipend (61.9%) nor supplemental professional development funds (73.8%), nor graduate assistants (70.6%), nor clerical support staff (70.7%). Therefore, an overwhelming number of program coordinators are not receiving incentives or support. Ingle and Marshall (2024) conducted a follow-up study post-pandemic to determine if there was a change in responsibilities and incentives. Unfortunately, many of the support mechanisms in place prior to the pandemic actually decreased.

The amount of work that a program coordinator must do contributes to one of the most common challenges of being a program coordinator—time. Hackmann and Wanat (2008) found that program coordinators spend between 10-30 hours per week on coordinator duties. Their follow-up study reported that program coordinators estimated between 20-35 hours per week

(Hackmann & Wanat, 2016). This work is in addition to the program coordinator's research and teaching responsibilities. Hackmann and Wanat (2016) discussed that dedicated time for research is typically what is decreased by the amount of work a program coordinator must undertake. For this reason, some faculty specifically avoid doing program coordination because of the workload and stress associated with the role (Bieber et al., 2024). Ingle et al. note that,

Without clearly defined duties, program coordinators risk being placed in untenable situations, devoting hours to program obligations while attempting to balance these quasi-administrative duties alongside their more typical faculty responsibilities, including teaching, advising, scholarship, and service. (2020, p. 121)

Theoretical Framework

This study used role socialization theory (RST) (Richards, 2015) which examines how individuals are socialized into their roles and how their roles in turn shape their behavior in the workforce. It evolved from the intersections of role theory (RT) (Biddle, 1979) and occupational socialization theory (OST) (Pennington, 2021). According to Biddle (1979), social positions can be defined as the expectations and characteristics of a particular role (p. 5), while OST posits a reliance on mentorship as a socializing agent (Pennington, 2021). RST suggests that one's understanding and performance within their role is shaped by a socialization process and is based on "reliable guidelines for behavior" (Richards, 2015, p. 382). Without these guidelines or expectations, individuals will experience stress. Within RST, there are three stressors: role ambiguity, role overload, and role conflict (Richards, 2015). Role ambiguity is due to not having clear expectations of the role. Role overload occurs when there is too much work to be completed within a reasonable amount of time. Finally, role conflict occurs when meeting the expectations of the role is perceived to be impossible. RST is the appropriate choice for this study to examine the role of the online program coordinator and how that role is impacted by the socialization process within higher education.

Methodology

This study used a basic qualitative approach (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The goal of conducting a basic qualitative study is to "*understand* how people make sense of their lives and their experiences" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 42). The researcher wanted to focus on how participants make sense of their experiences as an online program coordinator, and, as a researcher, to "uncover and interpret these meanings" (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 43). A basic qualitative approach was appropriate because of the focus on constructing meaning, having a purposeful sample, collecting data through interviews, analyzing the data through inductive thematic analysis, and reporting findings that are richly descriptive (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 57).

Positionality

The researcher has been a program coordinator of an online graduate program at an R1 institution and has been a program coordinator of an undergraduate program at an R2 institution in the southeastern Carnegie region (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education [CCIHE], n.d.) of the United States. She has taught online for several years. The impetus for this

study arose from her experience as a program coordinator, and, as a quasi-insider among the study participants, the researcher was also familiar with what questions to ask and how to ask follow-up questions. The researcher also maintained a reflexive stance throughout the study.

Trustworthiness

Rich detailed data were collected from multiple sources and institutional types across three Carnegie regions (CCIHE, n.d.). This process established trustworthiness for the study and allowed the researcher to triangulate the data (Creswell & Miller, 2000). Peer debriefing (Nguyễn, 2008) was used to enhance confirmability and mitigate researcher bias.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

Purposive sampling (Robinson, 2014) was used for the intentional selection of participants. For this research study, eligible participants were between the ages of 18 and 89, a current program coordinator of an online program, currently teaching in a public institution of higher education in the United States, and physically present in the United States at the time of the questionnaire completion and interview.

After receiving IRB approval, the researcher sent a recruitment email through various professional organizations' listservs as well as posted on social media websites within the researcher's professional network. This email included information about the purpose of the study, the inclusion criteria to qualify for the study, and a Qualtrics link to the informed consent form and demographic questionnaire. After participants consented to participate in the study and completed the questionnaire, the researcher then emailed the participants to set up a phone or Zoom interview. The semi-structured interviews (Schwandt, 2015) consisted of nine questions that focused on roles and responsibilities, the review process, incentives, workload, and support and developmental needs (see Appendix for the interview protocol). The interview protocol was developed by adapting prior established research from Ingle et al. (2020), in which they created a questionnaire with both quantitative and open-ended questions (W. K. Ingle, personal communication, May 6, 2024) and from the researcher's own experience as a program coordinator. The interviews were no more than 1.5 hours. They were recorded and transcribed verbatim by transcription software.

Participants

There were 27 respondents to the recruitment email. Three participants were screened out due to eligibility, two completed the demographics questionnaire but did not provide contact information to set-up the interview, two did not respond to multiple email requests to set-up the interview, one consented but did not complete all of the demographics questionnaire nor their contact information, two consented but did not complete any of the questions on the demographics questionnaire, and one exited the questionnaire prior to consenting. In total, 16 participants were interviewed.

Pseudonyms were assigned to protect participants' identities. Thirteen of the participants were female and three were male. All but two participants identified as white/European American and two identified as Asian/Asian American (see Table 1).

Table 1*Participant Identifiers*

Participant pseudonym	Sex	Age	Race/ Ethnicity
Alexandra	F	30*	W/EA
Amanda	F	49	W/EA
April	F	39	W/EA
Barbara	F	48	W/EA
Brenda	F	49	W/EA
Carl	M	65	W/EA
Cindy	F	55	W/EA
Gina	F	48	W/EA
Kevin	M	50	W/EA
Lisa	F	51	W/EA
Putri	F	39	A/AA
Rebecca	F	31	W/EA
Susan	F	60	W/EA
Tianyi	F	50	A/AA
Troy	M	45	W/EA
Wendy	F	52	W/EA

Note. *30-something, W/EA (White/European American), A/AA (Asian/Asian American)

Participants had experience teaching in three of the Carnegie regions in the United States with eight participants teaching at an R1, seven participants teaching at an R2, and one participant teaching at an M2 (CCIHE, n.d.). They also coordinated a variety of credentialed and non-credentialed programs (see Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Institutional Identifiers

Participant pseudonym	Faculty position	Time in higher ed	Time in current position	Carnegie classification	Carnegie region	Time as PC/Dir	Program coordinated
Alexandra	Tenure-equiv admin	12 yrs	2 yrs	R1	SW	5 yrs	Other
Amanda	NTT	21 yrs	13 yrs	R1	SW	8 yrs	Other
April	NTT	2 yrs	2 yrs	R2	SE	2 yrs	M, End, Cert
Barbara	TT	20 yrs	20 yrs	R1	SE	4 yrs	M, Doc
Brenda	Tenured	27 yrs	11 yrs	R2	SE	4 yrs	M, Cert
Carl	Tenured	45 yrs	7 yrs	R1	SE	5 yrs	M
Cindy	Tenured	16 yrs	16 yrs	M2	TP	8 yrs	Min, B, M, Cert
Gina	Tenured	22 yrs	8 yrs	R2	SE	On/off for 15 yrs	B, M
Kevin	Tenured	30 yrs	18 yrs	R1	SW	2 yrs	Min, Cert, Doc
Lisa	NTT	18 yrs	8 yrs	R2	SE	7 yrs	M, Cert
Putri	TT	4 yrs	4 yrs	R2	SE	3 yrs	M, End
Rebecca	NTT	7 yrs	5 yrs	R2	SE	4 mos	M, Cert
Susan	Tenured	22 yrs	15 yrs	R2	SE	8 yrs	Sp, Doc
Tianyi	NTT	2 yrs	2 yrs	R1	SE	1 yr	M, Cert, Doc
Troy	Tenured	15 yrs	7 yrs	R1	SW	2 yrs	M, Cert, Doc
Wendy	TT	17 yrs	5 yrs	R1	SE	5 yrs	M

Note. NTT (Non-tenure track), TT (Tenure-track), SW (Southwest), SE (Southeast), TP (The Plains), M (Master's), End (Endorsement), Cert (Certificate), Doc (Doctorate), Sp (Specialist), Min (Minor), B (Bachelor's)

Data Analysis

The researcher used thematic analysis to analyze the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is a method that can be used to “identify patterns within and *across* data in relation to participants’ lived experience, views and perspectives, and behavior and practices” (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297). Thematic analysis was selected for this work because of its flexibility. It focuses on patterns of meaning and gives voice to the participants using a deductive or inductive approach (or both) and semantic or latent codes (or both).

For the purpose of this study, the researcher used an inductive (data-driven) approach and followed the six phases of thematic analysis from Braun and Clarke (2006). As part of data familiarization, interview transcripts were checked thoroughly, de-identified, and reviewed again. Initial codes were generated through two cycles of open coding; potential themes were generated and then reviewed against the coded data and the data set of interviews, and refined. The themes were then defined and named. Finally, examples from the data set were selected and then the report was written (Clarke & Braun, 2017).

Findings

The study sought to explore the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators and the support they receive and need. The findings are described based on the two research questions.

RQ 1: What Are the Roles and Responsibilities of Online Program Coordinators?

All the participants described a range of responsibilities for their role as an online program coordinator. In many cases, there was ambiguity about what was included in the role because a formal job description did not exist. Tianyi stated that she was told her job duties were “it’s everything...you’ll get it when you get hands on what are the things you need to do.”

Troy stated that he was not aware of what was involved in the work prior to stepping into the role. He shared, “That was the kind of granular curricular work I wasn’t expecting to do...You can only appreciate [it] if you’ve done it. Like, you describe it to other people, and you sound like you’re unwell.”

In the following section, the following six themes are presented: enrollment management, curriculum and program infrastructure, faculty support, student support, personnel-related tasks, and “other duties as assigned.” Each will be discussed in the following subsections.

Enrollment Management

Enrollment management played a large role in online program coordinators’ job duties. It encompasses tasks such as recruitment and marketing for prospective students, retention for current students, and assessment and accreditation reporting for the institution and regional accreditors.

Many of the participants spoke about their role with recruitment. April hosts virtual information sessions that can take place either weekly or monthly. She shared, “Recruitment is a big part of my role and I host monthly information sessions...I work with another department to create the ads, and when those ads are running, I do information sessions every week to help

with that recruitment.” For Barbara, recruitment also involved in-person recruiting. She said, “If we go to a conference, then I’m the one sitting at the table.”

Some other participants were heavily involved in the marketing and social media for their programs. Tianyi said that she designed the flyers and was responsible for marketing and social media. She shared, “I put together the project plan, like considering what kind of promotional channels I could use, like the Facebook groups, and then what kind of email listserv I could use, and things like that.”

Participants also discussed their roles in the admissions process for their programs, which included working with the applicant to ensure their application is complete or making admission decisions. Brenda shared,

I help students get their packets together...If they have questions about letters of reference or their statement of purpose, I answer those. I try to meet with, either via Zoom or phone or in person, every applicant ahead of time.

Lisa discussed being responsible for making admission decisions year-round. She stated, “I do all the admissions and rejections...I’m typically the sole person making admit, denying decisions for my programs. And we do rolling admissions...So, I’m doing that all year – summer, spring, fall.”

Program coordinators may also be responsible for course scheduling and monitoring enrollment numbers, which requires ongoing work throughout the year. Putri shared,

I have three different cohorts that are taking three different programs of study right now...so it’s a lot to juggle right now, deciding how many course sections need to be open, and then what cohort takes what course, what course sections, how is this communicated to the students, to other program coordinators, so their students are not in my sections, [what] instructors are going to teach the courses.

Troy also spoke about course scheduling and finding faculty to teach the courses. He stated,

Probably the biggest headache I have right now is just trying to figure out what needs to be taught when and by whom, and then, invariably, what am I going to do when, you know, turnover [of faculty]. Thankfully it slowed. But yeah, every spring is like, who am I going to get an email from?

Both Kevin and Brenda discussed developing a manual system for enrollment management. Kevin stated that he developed surveys to determine what classes were needed by students. He shared,

One of our other issues is that students were not getting the classes that they wanted, and they didn’t know far enough ahead that they could switch things over, and they would get very angry. This way I can head that off by cancelling classes earlier.

Brenda shared that she creates her own spreadsheet to track active, inactive, and potential students. “I have my own special enrollment strategy that is time intensive and not probably smart health-wise for me.”

Accreditation and reporting was another major responsibility for many participants and an area where participants talked about having difficulty. Susan shared, “That’s been the toughest part of the job for me to get a handle on actually. Because we have the two tracks, I actually have two different reporting duties.” April and Troy spoke about not receiving a lot of guidance on the reporting process. April shared,

None of that had been done in our program before. So, I kind of got handed a template that you have to fill out. And then I was like, “we don’t have any of this data.” So, a large part of my first two years here has been trying to figure out what do we actually need to do.

Troy said,

You’re sort of inheriting things, and my predecessor did a good job, I think, of making do with what was available. But now...[I’m] trying to think about more appropriate methods or principles, like, you know, what data should be reflective of this or that?

Kevin noted that his responsibility with the accreditation report shifted from the department chair to him. He shared,

I have to write the annual accreditation report, which didn’t used to be the responsibility of the [program] director. It used to just be the department chair, but they have now delegated that, which is probably better, because I review all of them.

Curriculum and Program Infrastructure

Most of the participants spoke about their role with overseeing the curriculum; however, those responsibilities varied from being fully in charge to not having authority over making changes. Alexandra shared that her program had multiple courses with a shared curriculum.

I’m in charge of developing, maintaining, updating, revising all of those things, distributing, making sure everything goes smoothly by overseeing the policies that kind of govern how instructors use these courses...so, everything from developing new assignments or introducing a new digital tool.

Both Carl and Amanda stated that they had significant responsibilities with curriculum decisions. Carl shared that any changes to the curriculum required the department faculty vote, but “the responsibility for thinking about whether our curriculum is meeting the needs of our audience, and you know, helping them prepare for contemporary practice and future practice, and all those sorts of questions, that’s largely my impetus.” Amanda shared “I am the decider about curriculum. I ultimately make decisions about how we change the curriculum.”

Wendy noted that she was solely responsible for updating every course in her program. She shared,

I have to prep the courses for adjuncts because we don't pay adjuncts for prep, we only pay them to facilitate the course. So, all the course content for my courses, plus adjuncts. Sometimes I'm prepping upwards of eight to nine courses a semester at the beginning of each semester for these courses to go.

However, in other cases, the online program coordinator may not be responsible for curriculum revisions. Tianyi spoke about some confusion about who should make revisions. She shared, "That is not clear. I still don't know what the process is, what the decision tree is. I have no idea." Rebecca noted that curriculum was not part of her job responsibility because she was not the subject matter expert. She stated, "I am not qualified to make curriculum decisions. I am here to inform from an advising and course sequencing standpoint, but I'm ultimately not going to make decisions about course content."

Curriculum responsibilities may also include supervising capstone projects, portfolios, and internships, developing comprehensive or qualifying exams, and hosting in-person residencies. Lisa shared, "We do have a required internship and our required student capstone project, where they have to complete the project and present at the conclusion of the class to a committee...I chair them all. Last semester, I had 17." Kevin was additionally responsible for the logistics of planning the annual multi-day residency for his program. He stated, "So, I have to plan that conference, which is a full blown 12-15 hour-a-day conference. And we have speakers and all sorts of activities and events and everything else this year."

In many cases, program coordinators had to establish and maintain partnerships with outside partners for advisory boards, guest speakers for professional development, and internships for students. April shared, "I'm trying to bring in local businesses and non-profits to have projects in our work. So, I do some networking and meeting with folks around that idea." Barbara shared that she had outside guest speakers. "I invite speakers, and I invite students to attend these different programs, and they're all online, because it's an online program. But to get students to actually participate is exhausting."

Supporting the curriculum and program infrastructure may also include developing policies and creating handbooks and other documentation. Troy shared,

One of the things I've been responsible for is sort of writing or updating and revising [the grad student handbook], or how that process is described and the guidance that we provide students in the handbook. So, at the policy level, I'm kind of coordinating our discussions.

Faculty Support

Providing faculty support in some capacity is another responsibility for many online program coordinators. However, this level of support varied across participants. Susan spoke of

sending out a newsletter to all the program faculty to keep them informed. “I like to think I am [providing support to faculty], but I think I can do better there. I think the newsletter helps.” Rebecca supported faculty by “offloading a lot of those responsibilities in order to free them up to do the teaching and the research that they want and the mentorship that they want to do...I’m hoping my role is like freeing people up.”

For programs that had adjunct faculty or contingent faculty, the online program coordinator may also be involved in supporting those faculty. Alexandra and Amanda provided support that was intended to directly benefit the adjunct faculty. Alexandra shared that her responsibility was,

mostly just preparing them for teaching online...We have weekly meetings...where we come together, discuss recent ideas, topics in [our field], share concerns, or any current updates, share ideas and strategies, any sort of issue of the day or whatever, technical issues, curriculum questions.

Similarly, Amanda shared that she hosts virtual brown bag sessions twice a year for professional development. “I see my job as really about making sure that I’m translating to them where the field is at in terms of best practices.”

Student Support

Participants spoke about the various ways in which they offer student support. Often, this was through advising or building community within the online program. Gina shared that she was building an onboarding system for students,

I’ve got a series this week and next week of advising where I say, “take these classes” and [it] could be an email, but we’re going to onboard because we still want high touch. So, high touch it is and it works...Do it up front, and it’ll be great for the long run...I have some ideas on how to consistently do that to reduce my workload, which is the ultimate when you find that synthesis in the system.

Brenda spoke about being the primary contact for students so she can help direct them to the appropriate contact. She shared,

Once they get accepted to the graduate college and we accept them to the program, I say, “I’m the person you ask the questions of, I might not be able to answer them, but I can tell you where to go.”

Rebecca stated that she does all the advising for the program. She shared, “The only reason I would refer a student to a faculty member is if it is a subject matter expertise situation...but everything is with me centralized for the purpose of consistency.” Cindy shared that she used to be responsible for all the advising but was not able to continue because of the workload.

I had 100+ advisees, all in different programs that I had to meet with every semester. At the end of last semester, I went to the head of the department. I was like, “five years is

enough, I cannot continue this. I'm finished." And so, I have trained someone over this summer to do that job.

Many participants spoke about being involved in building an online community for students through hosting a webinar, sharing information through a newsletter, or having students follow a cohort-model. Susan discussed the importance of building a community for online students. She stated, "For online [students] who are distributed, I can only imagine that it feels much more isolating. So, I think that that community building piece is really important."

Student support may also be through finding graduate assistantships for students. However, in Wendy's case, offering those graduate assistantships means she is taking on additional workload to have them funded by a different office. She shared,

I'm responsible for upkeep of our graduate assistant program. And in order to get graduate assistant program money, I have to do some volunteer work across campus for our student affairs program...throughout the year. And in exchange for that, I can get a 20-hour a week job that pays about \$1000 a month stipend.

Personnel-Related Responsibilities

Several of the programs had adjunct faculty and the program coordinators had some level of personnel-related responsibilities. However, that responsibility varied. In some cases, they were only responsible for providing recommendations on adjunct faculty hiring. Both Putri and Tianyi discussed being included in the conversations, but they were not making decisions. Putri shared, "When I need [an] instructor for different course sections, usually [the] department chair will ask, 'who do you think is a good fit to teach this course?'" Tianyi was sometimes included in the conversation with the other program faculty, but it was not consistent. She shared, "Sometimes, they [other faculty] would loop me in, in the email. Sometimes...I was engaged in the conversation...and then if there's any meetings, then I would join." In other cases, participants were much more involved in the hiring process. Lisa shared,

I'm the hiring manager, I guess you would want to say. I choose who those people are going to be. Of course, they get vetted through the department and through the graduate school before it's official that they are teaching with us.

Amanda spoke about being responsible for personnel-related duties outside of the hiring process. She shared,

There's other things personnel-related, like when somebody's spouse dies or child. I've had people lose like very close family members, and then, trying to think, figure out what resources are available when a faculty member has a health issue or some other issue come up...I've had to fire people, like not renew their contracts. I've had to have hard conversations with people about their performance.

Gina noted that she had to have a difficult conversation with an adjunct who received poor teaching evaluations. She stated, "I know that it will fall on me, even though it's not my role. This is the like, what we're expected to do versus what we really do situation."

“Other Duties as Assigned”

Online program coordinators may also be responsible for taking on additional duties. Barbara shared, “I get put on several committees that [admin] see is tangential to my work...And so there are other things that enveloped in the role as [program coordinator], just because of, I see the big picture of all of the programs.” As a solo faculty member and program coordinator, Wendy had to take on all the assigned duties without being able to delegate them. She shared,

I’m drowning in “other duties as assigned,” and “oh, you’re the program coordinator, so you should take care of that.” At some point, you need to recognize that I am the program coordinator, but unlike other program directors and coordinators, I have no one to help share that work with. I’m directing no one to help take over that, like I’m doing the whole kit and caboodle.

RQ 2: What Kinds of Support Do Online Program Coordinators Receive for Their Role and What Support Do They Need?

In the following section, three themes are presented: it’s meeting my support needs, it’s not meeting my support needs, and where I need support. Each of these will be further discussed.

It’s Meeting My Support Needs

There were different types of support that met the participants’ needs. Sometimes it was having emotional support or having an additional person or office take on the responsibility or for having a reduction in other workload responsibilities.

Emotional Support. Receiving emotional support can come from different sources, including colleagues, administrators, and other program coordinators. Gina shared, “I have amazing colleagues...they are very helpful for conversations on how to move work forward.”

Both Alexandra and Carl discussed receiving emotional support from administrators. Alexandra shared that she feels support from “understanding from higher admins that online courses are different from face-to-face courses.” Carl noted that he feels appreciated by his colleagues and Dean because of how they speak about online programs. He said,

The one thing I can say is that I know from my colleagues, and I know from my Dean, that they genuinely value the online programs, that they see them as important...And I know that because, like the Dean will talk about that in big public settings. And, you know, that messaging is important to me. It’s also important to our students.

Sometimes the support comes from talking to others in similar positions. Susan, Lisa, and Tianyi all attend a program coordinator meeting at their institutions. Susan shared that as a program coordinator she attends both a campus-wide graduate program coordinator meeting and a doctoral program council meeting. She stated, “It’s been a nice communication channel, I think, to learn about what’s coming down the pike, and to perhaps provide some feedback or ideas for what should come down the pike.” Susan also shared that there is a college-wide program coordinator meeting as well. “We’ve re-written the [College] handbook for doctoral

students. And it's been good to have discussions around well, 'what do y'all do?' 'what do y'all do?' And that's been a supportive network as well."

Lisa shared that she attends a program coordinator meeting at both the college and university levels. "So, there is a group that you have access to for support that do the same job that you do. And that's helpful at times to be able to talk to people that have similar functions."

Sharing the Workload. Sometimes the support comes from having another person such as other faculty or an assistant to share the workload. Cindy shared,

The workload, it's okay, because I do feel like I have some fabulous faculty that I work with. And whenever we get together, and we sit in a room and talk to each other, we can get some things done...I feel like my job is to drive the bus and just make sure everybody's doing what needs to be done. I don't have to think of it all myself.

Putri shared, "I also have a program assistant who helped me revamp a course."

Sometimes an institution has centralized services across campus such as marketing and communication, instructional design, assessment, and a graduate school, where professional staff have expertise in a particular area and can complete the work more effectively and efficiently. Rebecca, Barbara, and Amanda spoke about how they were receiving support from various institutional offices. Rebecca shared, "So, we have a person who manages our website, managing marketing and social media within the [college]." Barbara also shared having support for marketing and outreach. "They actually push out our programs on platforms that sometimes I'm not even aware of, which I think is helpful, because they're reaching people that I would otherwise just not have the bandwidth to reach." Amanda shared that her online college has provided additional support in various ways, such as "helping with ramping up the amount of instructional design...data support, like trying to help provide more support with enrollment planning."

Barbara stated that the centralized graduate studies office within the school is helpful for keeping student records and reducing some of her workload so she can focus on other tasks. She shared, "And that's helpful, because that's where I get a little aggravated. I could be doing a whole slew of other things, but I'm filing forms. They have graduate assistants that can help with that process."

Incentives for the Work. Several participants received incentives in the form of a reduction in the workload, either with teaching or with other service obligations, in order to have time to be able to address all the online program coordinator tasks. Some participants also spoke about receiving a stipend.

Putri shared, "I get a course release [for fall and spring], but I also, in the past, had to fight for it, and it could be taken any moment...We get a stipend [for summer]." Brenda noted that other service requirements have been reduced. She shared,

I don't do a lot of service outside the department, because we had about three years where [former chair] and I wrestled with the amount of service I was doing outside of the department in addition to the graduate coordinator role.

Alexandra has both a reduction in workload and an assistant director. "I have 1-1 teaching. I have an assistant director, which helps a lot. It's kind of a very limited time position, I want to say, but it's something."

It's Not Meeting My Support Needs

Participants spoke about receiving support that was not effective. Brenda shared that sometimes the support that is in place is not useful (or accurate). She said, "We have data systems...I can pull who are active students. It's not accurate...[so] I make my own spreadsheets."

Gina and Wendy both shared that there may be support offered from another person, but it may not be very effective for a variety of reasons. Gina said,

I, until this year, have been a co [online program coordinator]. So, our roles and responsibilities were divvied by time, not by task, so that meant, like we alternated semesters...and that proved to be complicated in terms of consistency and oversight and style.

Wendy noted that there is a graduate assistant available in the department that can be shared across programs. However, it was not very beneficial. She shared,

Their first job is to take care of things for the department. So, rarely, are they free to do anything. And then when I do have them to work with, I have them for like 30 minutes to an hour. And so, it's not like I can accomplish a whole lot because it'll take me that long to sit down and catch you up on why we're doing this process and how the process needs to be done. And by the time you're ready to start the work, your time with me is up, you gotta go someplace else.

Susan discussed doing the work herself but chose not to. She shared, "I could lean on [administrative assistant] for stuff if I wanted to...But I do try to do now as much of that for myself as I can, just because it's almost easier."

Where I Actually Need Support

Every participant spoke about needing additional support in some capacity, either from having administrators recognize the workload that went into being an online program coordinator and receiving support from them, receiving appropriate compensation, having additional resources, or receiving training and mentoring for the role.

Recognizing the Workload. In most cases, participants wanted administrators to recognize the amount of workload that was involved in being an online program coordinator, often a full-time job in itself. This was the case for Kevin who was trying to justify having a graduate assistant due to the 80 hours a week that he was working. Before the COVID-19

pandemic, every program coordinator had a graduate assistant. After the pandemic, those graduate assistant positions were cut. He shared,

When you're arguing to someone, "hey, this is an obscene amount of time" to someone who's never done the job, it's challenging. But, then I show them my calendar, and everything on the calendar for the [program] is [color-coded]. And they see that most of my week is taken up with [color] from 8 o'clock in the morning until 10 o'clock at night, it's a little harder to argue with.

Gina and Carl described not having enough time to complete all the tasks, which often led to the work not being done. Gina said, "I do not have sufficient resources to accomplish all the tasks that I'd like to, so it becomes what's on fire." Carl shared,

I wish we had people to do that [social media]. We don't. So, what happens is, there are a number of us [faculty] that are varying degrees of active on social media. And so, we use our personal accounts to push messaging... We have these meetings about twice a year where we're all wringing our hands to talk about how important marketing and social media is, and then none of us has the time to do it.

Other participants spoke about having to juggle their coordinator duties with their other faculty responsibilities. Barbara shared, "If being a [program coordinator] was my sole job, I could come up with lots of things, update it, keep it fresh, and what have you. But you know, I'm teaching class and research[ing] and writing."

Cindy and Putri shared their concerns about the workload impact on earning tenure and promotion. Cindy became a program coordinator at the beginning of her third year as a tenure-track faculty. She shared,

I was junior faculty, which made it very difficult for me to meet all the requirements for tenure and promotion. I was able to do that, but I was forever having other people say "you need to be protecting your calendar better. You shouldn't be doing as much as you're doing as junior faculty."

Putri echoed this concern. She shared, "We know that service is not what is gonna get us promoted and tenured."

Almost all the participants shared that they did not have a formal review process, but they wanted one. In most cases, their role as an online program coordinator was not seen as a separate role but was tied in with their overall faculty review process. Lisa shared,

I wouldn't be opposed to it because I do know of other program directors or program coordinators that aren't as involved in the multiple roles that I do for their programs... I think that would help consistency for the role across the university and the college. Maybe would raise the bar a little bit for the role.

Tianyi shared, “If there could be a solid reviewing process, then we could sit down and have a clearer overview, or review of what’s put in there and then [discuss] is the workload fair.”

In addition, several participants commented on the lack of authority they had despite being in an administrative position as an online program coordinator. Rebecca shared,

I am a little concerned about the fact that my title is now “coordinator” instead of “director.” I do think internally that’s not an issue, but if we start looking externally, and like people listening to me, that’s an issue.

Amanda spoke about the role of online program coordinator being included in more strategic conversations. She wanted support and more information from administrators for “long-term planning, strategies, growth to meet, you know, how are we going to grow to meet demand? How are we gonna balance these things?”

Administrators may not be addressing the bigger issues that online program coordinators need. Wendy wanted more support from administrators than just a check-in on enrollment management. She shared,

I have check-ins where somebody comes along and says “just checking in, how are things going? You doing okay? Could you provide your numbers for us? Looks like you’re down a little bit this semester, you think you get more by the end? Okay, thanks for the update.” So, I get check-ins. I don’t get support, and I think that’s problematic.

Receiving Compensation for the Work. There was no consistency across all participants in terms of what they received (if anything) for compensation. Several participants spoke about the role being year-round, although that does not fit into a typical nine-month contract. This off-contract work may or may not be compensated financially. Brenda shared,

I have a ten-and-a-half month contract instead of a nine-month contract...and it should be a 12-month contract because it’s not like grad students go away that other month and a half [during the summer]. And I fought for that to be a 12-month position, but [administration] don’t seem very open to that. So, this year for the first time...I did not do work while I was off-contract.

April shared,

I’m on a nine-month contract, which is often extended to a 10-month contract. For program coordinators, we get that extra month, usually it’s just not promised...Because our students are still applying and the applications are not done, they need advising when they’re getting onboarded... So, I’m paid for May, and then June and July technically not [paid] unless I’m teaching. But of course, I continue to do all of our students work, at the very least.

Cindy shared, “I don’t get a course release. I don’t get a stipend. I get to put it in my signature on my email. I get the title ‘coordinator,’ but coordinators don’t get any kind of compensation for anything.”

Additional Resources Needed. Several participants spoke about wanting additional resources, both in terms of financial resources or additional personnel. Carl and Lisa spoke about wanting resources for their program but not necessarily needing it for themselves personally. Carl shared that he wanted to be able to support students attending conferences. He said,

I wish I had money to help my students get out to conferences because we always make the assumption that their home departments wherever they work, because they’re all working professionals, that their home departments are going to take care of this. But my experience is they don’t always.

Carl also shared that he wanted more money for marketing. “I think there’s a story to be told that would help us bring more students and, but also, that could help other institutions that want to build successful online programs learn how to do that.” Lisa shared,

I think to have a successful program, and what I’ve been wanting support in, is additional faculty and software. And so, the program quality can be better, not just bigger. And sometimes I feel like it’s quantity over quality that’s supported.

Cindy and Amanda wanted more transparency with the budget. Cindy wanted to purchase gift cards for her online students and then all meet synchronously together with the beverage or food that students purchased with the gift cards. She shared,

I feel like the budget thing is kind of a big deal. I never have any idea what might be approved and what might not be approved and what could I do. So, I would dream differently if I knew what my limits were.

Amanda also wanted more “transparency around [the] budget, and what we could do and what we can’t.”

Alexandra wanted more on-going instructional support for faculty teaching online classes. She shared,

If you’re developing a new course, we’ll hook you up with instructional designers. But, once [the course is] developed...I feel like there could be more of instructional support for maintenance updates...and working regularly with instructional designers or with specialists who are in charge of our technology that’s provided whether it’s LMS or any of the external learning tools that the university purchases.

In some cases, participants wanted to be able to focus on the bigger picture of supporting their programs and have someone else to do some of the other day-to-day tasks. Kevin shared that he would like support from people, “because I’m not really directing. I am doing pure

operations, management, and day-to-day staff type work, which, as a full professor trying to juggle everything, is not fun.”

Lisa echoed this as well. “Anything that could create more time for me to dedicate to the important things that I think are for teaching and being program director and things that are less, you know, administrative tasks.” Amanda shared that she would like some administrative support for scheduling, in particular.

I don’t want to schedule anymore. I should be doing big picture stuff, right. And then I get bogged down in these little tasks. I want to give the scheduling to other people to do, so I can do other things.

Onboarding and Mentoring for the Role. Many online program coordinators were not prepared for the roles they had been given or taken on because no one had provided them with a clear expectation of what they would be doing. April, Troy, Susan, and Putri spoke about having onboarding for the role. April noted wanting to know about the overall structure of the different offices and systems at the institution. She shared,

I found that probably the most challenging thing to really figure out are the systems and who’s in charge of each of them, and what things you can do within each of those... There’s no onboarding that kind of explains these different systems, and all the different technologies and reporting softwares that we have....It’s all trial and error or orally passed on.

Troy started his online program coordinator position during application season. He shared,

My first thing out of the gate was applications will be here. And so, they had just switched the system by which those things came. There was no training to the support point. I kept asking, like “how do I learn to use this?” They’re like “ah, you just click around.”

Susan shared she wanted more support with accreditation and reporting. She stated, “I think I would have liked...a little more support for figuring out the accreditation piece or the reporting piece for data... It took me a long time to figure out how best to do that process.” Putri also shared about reporting, “I think that needs to be a more structured support in terms of completing reports.”

Wendy and Tianyi spoke specifically about wanting a mentor to be able to transition into the role and have ongoing support. Wendy shared that she “would have loved to have someone to come in to mentor. I would have loved to have some of the processes already defined for me.” Tianyi echoed this. “I think it would be ideal if there could be a mentor and then a transitioning period.”

Discussion

The findings show that online program coordinators are not being effectively socialized into the online program coordinator role (Richards, 2015). They do not have a clear definition of their role and do not have a formalized job description, which was consistent with prior research (Rost & Hover, 2022). The variety of job responsibilities was also consistent with prior research (Coleman & Reames, 2020; Hackmann & Wanat, 2008, 2016; Ingle et al., 2020; Ingle et al., 2018; Olt et al., 2026; Shelton et al., 2025). Additionally, there was a lack of consistency of the level of involvement from some program coordinators with any given task. The lack of clear expectations for the role and a formal review process to assess the online program coordinator's performance indicates that online program coordinators are working with a high-level of role ambiguity (Richards, 2015).

Some online program coordinators were receiving support in various areas, but it was not always clear about who was responsible for what task. In many cases, the support was not what the online program coordinators needed. They are suffering from role overload (Richards, 2015), sometimes more than doubling what they would be doing as faculty who are not also working as online program coordinators. Administrators did not seem to be aware of how much work is involved in the actual job duties, which was also a point of frustration for many of the participants. This lack of time to complete their responsibilities is problematic as they are focusing on program-related tasks that could be completed under a centralized office or by a staff person, while also being responsible for their faculty workload (Ingle et al., 2020).

Several participants spoke about having to navigate their role as an online program coordinator with their role as a faculty member. The expectations of the role promote role conflict (Richards, 2015) because the work conflicts with the expectations of being a faculty member who is responsible for teaching (and research and service, depending on the specific faculty role), with research having the most negative impact (Shelton et al., 2025). As Bieber et al. (2024) noted, this is why some faculty specifically avoid doing program coordination.

Institutions of higher education have onboarding programs or mentoring for new employees, early-career faculty, and often department chairs. However, for the participants, there was no onboarding for their online program coordinator roles. In many cases, online program coordinators were left to their own devices to perform the tasks with little to no help. Most faculty are not prepared to be in an online program coordinator role, nor do they have expertise or even basic knowledge in areas like enrollment management, accreditation, social media and marketing, recruiting, admissions processes, and hiring processes. However, they are expected to be able to work in each of these areas effectively and efficiently.

The online program coordinator role is vital to student success and wellbeing (Taylor et al., 2023) and online program quality (Shelton et al., 2025). However, it should receive the recognition that it is due. If online program coordinators who are also in faculty positions are to remain in these positions, they also need support to accomplish the tasks. Moreover, the compensation either through a course release or stipend sometimes is not worth the amount of work when the workload itself is more than a full-time job.

Limitations

This study had participants from predominantly humanities and social science disciplines. Additional research could be conducted from other disciplines, including business and STEM-focused.

Implications for Practice

Based on the findings, there are five suggestions for practice. First, administrators need to be much more aware of the workload that online program coordinators are taking on. Much of the work is invisible labor because online program coordinators and administrators are not tracking all the duties that require year-round work. Because of the online nature of the work, online program coordinators do not just work traditional business hours. They are constantly engaging during the evenings and weekends to meet the needs of online students who may be across time zones or working full-time positions and need support after business hours (Earnshaw & Bodine Al-Sharif, 2024). This is impacting their other academic duties. Second, having a formal annual review process in place to determine what work is being done by online program coordinators is critical. In addition to an annual review, regular meetings should be taking place to discuss the workload. Third, re-thinking the role of online program coordinators and providing effective support for them is critical. There are centralized services across campus which could help reduce the load for online program coordinators who are doing staff-related roles such as admissions processing, marketing, and social media development. Fourth, online program coordinators need to have formal onboarding and mentoring. Introducing online program coordinators to systems, policies, and procedures would help with efficiency. Finally, there should be discussions happening across campus for online program coordinators. Having larger conversations about the roles and responsibilities would be beneficial. This would also help to determine what support infrastructure is already in place and what is needed.

Implications for Research

Additional research is needed across institutions and disciplines. There is a lot of inconsistency about what an online program coordinator is responsible for. Much like how department chairs have a general job description, an online program coordinator should have a general job description as well. Another area for research could be interviewing administrators who oversee online programs to determine what support is being provided to online program coordinators.

Conclusion

The purpose of the research was to explore the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators and the support they receive and need. The research suggests that there are a multitude of responsibilities that online program coordinators undertake, sometimes without any assistance or guidance, which contributes to a very heavy workload. These responsibilities are in addition to their faculty positions that are already demanding. Administrators need to be aware of this workload and help to offload some of the work and put infrastructures in place.

Declarations

Ethics Statement

This study was conducted in accordance with recognized ethical standards. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and data were collected and reported with respect for confidentiality and anonymity.

The study protocol was reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board of Kennesaw State University, Approval No. IRB-FY24-625.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest related to the research, authorship, or publication of this article.

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Appendix

Interview Protocol

Introduction

Thank you so much for your willingness to participate in the study. Just as a reminder, the purpose of the study is to explore the roles and responsibilities of online program coordinators and the support they need. At any point during the interview process you are welcome to refuse to answer a question or to stop the interview. Likewise, you may also choose to withdraw from the study. If you withdraw, no data that have collected from you will be utilized in the study. Do you have any questions before we begin?

Roles and Responsibilities

1. In general, how do you define your role as a program coordinator? What does that look like?
2. How did you become a program coordinator?
 - a. Did the program exist? Did you contribute to its development?
 - b. How long is your term as program coordinator?
3. What are your roles and responsibilities as an online program coordinator? This may include things like:
 - a. Recruitment
 - b. Admissions
 - c. Enrollment/retention
 - d. Marketing/social media
 - e. Course scheduling
 - f. Curriculum
 - g. Exams
 - h. Advising
 - i. Community-building
 - j. Personnel - contingent faculty
 - k. Faculty support
 - l. Data collection for accreditation
 - m. Quality assurance
4. Is there a review process for your role as a program coordinator?
 - a. If so, what does that look like?
 - b. If not, would you like to have one and why?
5. What incentives do you receive as a program coordinator? (Stipends, course release, grad assistant, clerical help)
6. How does your role as a program coordinator fit into your workload and the tenure and promotion process?

Support and Developmental Needs

7. In general, how do you define support for you in this role? What does that look like?
8. What types of support do you receive as a program coordinator related to your job duties?
This may include things like:
 - a. Recruitment
 - b. Marketing/Outreach
 - c. Advisement
 - d. Course scheduling
 - e. Part-time faculty hiring/mentoring/assessment
 - f. Curriculum development (including textbook selection)
 - g. Orientation and program activities
 - h. Legal
 - i. Accreditation requirements/assessment and reporting requirements
 - j. Financial support/budget
 - k. Program assessment
 - l. Are there other types of support that we have not addressed that you receive?
9. What types of support would you like to have a program coordinator?

Wrap-up

10. Is there any information that you would like to provide that we have not asked for that you think would be pertinent to this discussion?