HOW DOES HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGE NON-FACULTY PROFESSIONAL STAFF TALENT? A CASE STUDY

by

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(Under the Direction of Amy E. Stich)

ABSTRACT

Higher education is in the midst of a staffing crisis that has been smoldering for decades, and now threatens the operations of campuses across the country. The purpose of this study is to understand how non-faculty professional staff talent is managed, particularly in the early career stage. The case for this study focuses on a mid-sized private university in the southeastern United States, and on the onboarding experiences of staff members who are responsible for student-facing activities related to student engagement, retention, and success. The two questions guiding this study are: (a) How do newly hired non-faculty professional staff at a small private university reflect upon their onboarding experiences; and (b) How do institutions and HR leaders describe the onboarding process and its value for newly hired non-faculty professional staff? Qualitative data was generated using semi-structured interviews and organizational documents.

INDEX WORDS: Onboarding, talent management, organizational commitment, role clarity, role ambiguity, retention, professional staff, higher education staff turnover

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DEDICATION

This is dedicated to my big brother, Steven Thurman Mitchell, Esq. I applied to this program one month after you passed away. Forty years earlier, when I was 10 years old, you wrote to me on the back of your high school graduation photo – “May the light of my path lead you in the right direction”. It always has. It still does.

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If this dissertation has one takeaway, it is that we are nothing without a great team. It's true for corporations, colleges, and universities. It is definitely true for me!

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HOW DOES HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGE NON-FACULTY PROFESSIONAL STAFF TALENT? A CASE STUDY

Background and Research Questions

According to many leaders of large, complex organizations such as corporations, talent is the institution's most valuable resource (Michaels et al., 2001; Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Thus, many corporations invest heavily in the talent management process, which includes everything from identifying and onboarding newly hired employees to succession planning for senior leadership. As universities have evolved over time into complex organizations that rely heavily on non-faculty professional staff to manage operations and deliver student programming, scarce research has examined talent management approaches within the context of higher education. This paucity of research could be a signal for how little retaining talent is valued in higher education (Lynch, 2007). The frustrating irony of that signal is how much attention is devoted to student retention in higher education, and rightfully so. But what about the people who deliver the retention programs on campuses? The apparent lack of attention on university staff talent development could also be an important insight and opportunity for attentive campus leaders as universities face similar competitive pressures as corporations, such as rapidly increasing competition for customers (students) and competition for talented employees (Bolman & Gallos, 2021). The ongoing crisis of rapid resignations of professional staff members outpacing hiring has been affecting college campuses for years and shows no signs of slowing (Luna, 2012; Tong, 2022; Zahneis, 2022). A 2022 survey from the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources provides a grim snapshot of the current situation for retaining professional staff talent on university campuses. According to their data, 57.2 percent of respondents were somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to leave their jobs within the next twelve months – an increase from 43 percent with these responses one year ago (Moody, 2022).

The "Great Resignation" is a phrase commonly used to describe the intense ongoing phenomenon of people voluntarily leaving their jobs since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (Lewis, 2022). According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, 47.8 million Americans quit their jobs in 2021, which averaged 500,000 more people quitting each month than the next highest year on record, 2009 (Lewis, 2022). While some have referred to the Great Resignation as the Great Reshuffling due to talent shifting within, rather than leaving, the workforce, higher education has been a net loser when it comes to the distribution of talent since 2020 (Zahneis, 2022). According to the Chronicle of Higher Education, nearly 80 percent of campus leaders surveyed said their campus has more open positions in 2022 than in 2021. In that same survey, 84 percent of respondents said that hiring for staff jobs has been more difficult in the past year due to higher education becoming a less appealing place to work compared to other sectors (Zahneis, 2022). This should be unsurprising as Jami Painter, Associate Vice President and Chief Human Resources Officer for the University of Illinois system pointed out, "Higher education, historically, has not kept pace with our private sector competitors in talent acquisition and management" (Kahr et al., 2022, p. 4).

Consistent with Painter's observation, talent management has grown into a robust body of literature over the past twenty years in sectors outside of higher education. To be sure, many private sector companies struggle with talent management. Not every company gets it right. However, some companies see major returns on investing in talent. In particular, the literature suggests that companies that apply talent management approaches with staff perform better overall, have stronger and more sustainable competitive advantages, and benefit from higher employee retention and satisfaction (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Kumar, 2022; McDonnell et al., 2017; Pfeffer, 1985). However, despite universities operating increasingly like companies with professional staff responsible for important operations (Bolman & Gallos, 2021; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001), scholarly literature on talent management in higher education is scarce and is generally focused on faculty (Bisbee, 2005; Bryman, 2007; Eisner, 2014). Professional staff receive few mentions in the literature, and those mentions are related to efforts to develop established campus leaders and plan for leadership transitions (Keller, 2018; Riccio, 2010; Woodard, 2013). Meanwhile, universities are being hit hard by depleting leadership pipelines and high attrition of newly hired and junior staff (Bolman & Gallos, 2021; Curran & Prottas, 2017; Luna, 2012).

As a foundational element of the talent management process, onboarding has been studied by scholars for its positive implications on newly hired employees such as retention, engagement, and loyalty (Bauer, 2010; Snell, 2006). Onboarding is not orientation. Onboarding is a process that can span months, not a singular event. Stein and Christensen (2010) draw a thorough and clear distinction between orientation and onboarding, beginning by describing a typical orientation program:

> New hires are pulled through maybe a half-day of company introduction focused on corporate history, compliance policies, and employee benefits. They’re given basic job direction, introduced to a few peers and company leaders, and made aware of available training resources. They’re provided with security access and basic work tools (e.g., phone, computer, instruments, etc.). And that’s where the formal process ends. Firms

> offer little inspiration nor specific challenge, direction, or commitment to new hires. During the rest of the new hire's first year—a make-or-break period in an employee's tenure—firms leave it to overwhelmed and under-prepared hiring managers to address informally the critical needs that all new hires face, including help with job preparedness, development, assimilation, networking, and career planning (p. 6).

These authors describe onboarding programs in different terms, highlighting the long-term value to both employee and organization:

> These programs incorporate an array of content, including what we refer to as the four organizing pillars—early career support; orientation to the firm's culture and its performance values; insight into the firm's strategic position, intent, and direction; and activities and experiences that enable the new hire to build beneficial relationships (p. 7).

Many companies specializing in human resource management make explicit contrasts between orientation and onboarding. Nielsen Associates, a Human Resources and Staffing company, provides a helpful framework for distinguishing between the two concepts:

Table 1

Orientation and Onboarding Comparison (nielsenstaffing.com)

	Orientation	**Onboarding**
Who	New hires from different departments across an organization	New hire in a specific department or role
When	First day/week	First 90 days or more
What	Mandatory paperwork, compliance, policies, intro to mission, vision, values + culture	Personal introductions to team, partners and stakeholders. Deep dive on department goals, objectives. Training.
Why	Get ready for onboarding + training	Successful integration, productivity, retention

Employees who experience the highest level of onboarding when they enter an organization are led through stages referred to as compliance, clarification, culture, and commitment (T. Bauer, 2010). At its best, when all four stages are included in the process, effective onboarding of new employees leads to feelings of organizational support, higher job satisfaction, higher organizational commitment and lower turnover (Meyer & Bartels, 2017). However, there is a gap in the higher education literature at the intersection of talent management, specifically onboarding, and newly hired professional staff. In other words, we know onboarding can be an effective tool for reducing turnover, but we know little about whether universities are investing in the onboarding of newly hired professional staff in ways that acknowledge them as valued resources within the organization.

Prior to describing the details of their recommendations for re-framing academic leadership, Bolman and Gallos (2021) make the following important point:

> Outsiders, particularly corporate executives, frequently ask why universities can't be run more like a business. They envision the superlative levels of speed, efficiency, and unity of effort that they like to think typify their corporate worlds – and wonder why higher education holds on to arcane practices like faculty governance and cumbersome decision-making processes (p. 7).

Higher education scholars have answered this question in many ways, including reminding those who ask of the higher social purpose served by these institutions (Holbrook, 2004). As Weber (2005) wrote, "In its core business, to borrow another term from the business literature, colleges and universities recognize that they are organized not to produce the greatest efficiencies, but to produce the greatest number of ideas and potential solutions to the problems that exist within the societies that sustain them, in addition to educating students for an uncertain future" (p. 42). At the same time, it can be counterproductive to resist all comparisons between corporations and universities because they are both complex organizations (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). As Bolman and Gallos (2021) argue, “Colleges and universities have some of the same elements found in almost any organization – goals, structures, administrative hierarchies, coordinating mechanisms, cultures, employees, vendors, and powerful stakeholders to name a few. Leaders in higher education should learn from advances whenever they can. Not every managerial wheel needs to be reinvented” (p.8). Perhaps the onboarding of newly hired professional staff is one such wheel.

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted all aspects of life, including every level of education delivery and most workplace environments. This disruption has intensified competition among universities and other types of organizations to attract and retain professional staff by provoking what has recently become known as “The Great Resignation.” Between April and November of 2021, over 33 million US workers voluntarily resigned from their jobs (*Another Great Resignation Record*, 2021). The higher education sector, specifically junior professional staff, has been impacted by high rates of attrition for decades prior to the Great Resignation due to a variety of role stressors such as role ambiguity (Curran & Prottas, 2017). However, unlike companies that have been actively refining their talent management strategies for decades, the lack of talent management literature specific to higher education professional staff indicates colleges and universities might be ill equipped to recover from such a disruption (Kahr et al., 2022; Luna, 2012; *The Great Resignation Hits Higher Education | Volt*, 2021). As possible evidence, at many universities across the US and worldwide, large numbers of professional staff members who were confused and angered by the COVID disruption with its sudden shift to fully online delivery and campus closings took the opportunity to leave their institutions (Bolman & Gallos, 2021).

As universities struggle to retain professional staff the immediate implications are becoming more evident as risks to critical staff-led operations such managing the student experience are beginning to materialize (Zahneis, 2022). Longer term implications of the high attrition of junior professional staff include the high costs of replacing those employees and a shrinking leadership pipeline within higher education (Bolman & Gallos, 2021; Kahr et al., 2022). Within the scope of talent management activities, onboarding of newly hired staff is fundamentally important to reduce role ambiguity, build loyalty and potentially increase retention allowing time for employees to grow and develop (Kahr et al., 2022; Snell, 2006).

This study serves as a plea to leaders in higher education. The staffing crisis is not necessarily inevitable if talent can be managed more effectively. The study contributes to the general bodies of scholarly literature in higher education on talent management. More specifically, this study focused on onboarding as the critical first phase of the talent management process. By focusing on the intersection of onboarding practices and newly hired professional staff in higher education, this study provides insights for campus leaders who are struggling with a crisis of talent depletion that is not likely to end soon (Tong, 2022; Zahneis, 2022). This is an important gap in the current literature given the scale and seriousness of this challenge. If incremental improvements in onboarding practices in higher education have the potential to resemble effects of similar practices in similarly complex organizations, universities could become more effective in retaining high-potential talent, more competitive in hiring new talent, and thus more effective in their staff-driven campus operations and in achieving their missions. While the missions of higher education institutions are different from the profit-driven missions of corporations, both types of organizations need to remain viable to serve their stakeholders. Professional staff, in both types of organizations, are key to that viability so why should there be differences in how they are onboarded as new employees?

Despite significant issues surrounding the retention of university staff, there is a dearth of knowledge on how talent management strategies are being applied to non-faculty professional staff at colleges and universities. The rare literature that does exist on this group has largely focused on later stages of talent management, examining efforts around high-potential employees and/or senior leaders. Retaining senior staff is important, however, junior employees are leaving universities at even greater rates (Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Onboarding literature generally agrees that employees are at the highest risk for resigning during the early stages of their career, however this segment of employees is not the main focus of existing higher education literature. Effective onboarding practices can improve retention of employees during those early stages (Allen, 2006; Bauer, 2010; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). The purpose of this study was to better understand how and to what extent newly hired non-faculty professional staff are onboarded in higher education in order to inform campus leaders on opportunities to increase organizational commitment and retention of this important segment of employee talent. Specifically, the following two research questions guided the proposed research study:

1. How do newly hired non-faculty professional staff at a small private university reflect upon their onboarding experiences?

This research question was addressed by conducting ten semi-structured interviews with staff members, asking open-ended questions to allow for as much elaboration for analysis as possible. Though interviews allowed for divergence, each participant responded to a set of common questions on onboarding best practices, defined by Bauer (2010) as Compliance, Clarity, Culture, and Connection.

2. How do institutions and HR leaders describe the onboarding process and its value for newly hired non-faculty professional staff?

This research question was significant because HR is responsible for onboarding at most organizations. The question primarily addressed in the study by reviewing internal documents and having purposeful meetings with campus leaders including individuals from the Campus Life leadership team, university Human Resources, and the university's executive leadership team.

Summary of Findings

The findings from this study reveal that participants most often attributed the factors contributing to their understanding of institutional culture, role clarity, network connections, and organizational commitment to their supervisors and co-workers, not to the institution. The data suggest that the staff members who are satisfied, engaged, productive, and loyal feel this way despite a lack of institutional onboarding practices, rather than because of the impact of those practices. Internal documents support the data from the interviews. One detailed document entitled "Talent Management at [University Name]" defines the institution's approach, stating, "Talent Management is the integration of four processes that help manage the talent of our community." Those processes do not include or mention onboarding. Therefore, according to the definition of experts including Collings and Mellahi (2009), this approach to talent management is incomplete because it is not inclusive of the onboarding of early career professionals. Without a complete approach to talent management, including onboarding that aligns with best practices, the institution is not positioned to leverage its staff talent as the sustainable competitive advantage it has the potential to be.

There are three noteworthy implications that were identified through this research study. First, the findings from this study support research that includes onboarding as a necessary component of a strategic approach to talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Next, this study reinforces research that argues that best-practice onboarding activities and practices can increase employee levels of organizational commitment, organizational support, and job satisfaction (Bauer, 2010; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Finally, this study affirms that universities may be included among eighty percent of organizations that fall short in this area by not proactively onboarding new staff members with all four best-practice elements (Bauer, 2010; Bauer, 2013). There are numerous opportunities to improve how onboarding programming is executed and communicated within universities, thus strengthening the institution’s talent management approach.

Table 2

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes from Study Findings

Best Practices from Bauer (2010)	Themes from Interview Data	Sub-Themes from Interview Data
Compliance	“Met with HR and did all the benefits stuff."	1. Four Hours at the HR Building 2. All About the Benefits, Baby 3. In-Person, Virtual, or Virtually Nothing
Clarification	“A lot of it was figuring things out as we went."	1. Role Ambiguity is a Red Flag 2. Supervisors Can Be Essential to Role Clarity 3. Role Clarity Connects to Personal Passion
Culture	“The values emphasized during onboarding align with my personal beliefs.”	1. Missions Matter 2. What’s Good for the Students is Good for the Staff 3. Culture is More than Mission
Connection	“Beginning to bridge those gaps and relationships early.”	1. Supervisors to the Rescue (again) 2. Confidence in the Work and Belonging 3. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

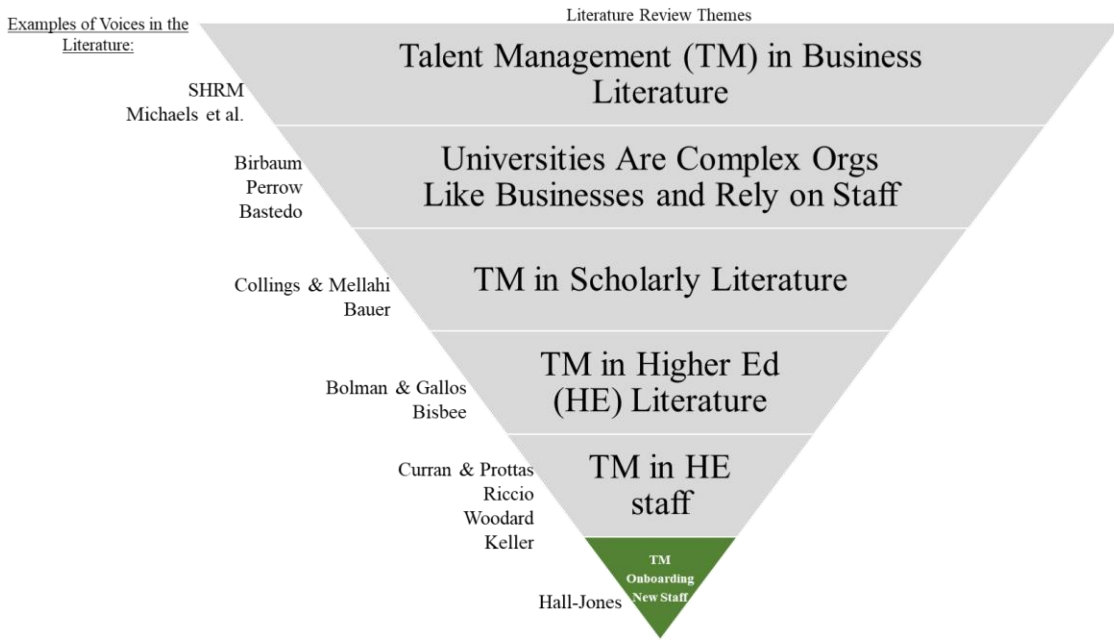
CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In this literature review, I begin with an overview of the evolution of the concept of talent management from its origin in the world of business practices. From there, it is important to acknowledge objectively, without making a case for or against, the similarities between modern universities and businesses. This acknowledgement is important because one of the main similarities between the modern higher education and business sectors is the reliance on staff to manage critical operations. The literature review then explores talent management and its establishment in the academic literature as an effective approach to maximizing one of the most valuable resources of any organization, its people. Though established in the scholarly literature, the study talent management is still largely focused on organizations that connect most closely to its origins, corporations. The literature review becomes more focused on the limited scholarly research applied to higher education, much of which is positioned towards faculty. Literature at the specific intersection of talent management and higher education non-faculty staff is scant and is reviewed to reveal an opportunity for this study to make its contribution. Talent management of mid-level and senior leaders in staff roles is explored to a limited extent. However, the experiences of newly hired non-faculty professional staff are explored exceptionally rarely. Meanwhile, this segment of university employees is a key driver of the crisis of resignations being experienced on university campuses (Zahneis, 2022) . A roadmap for this literature review is offered below with the gap addressed in this study illustrated at the bottom of the triangle:

Figure 1

Literature Review Themes



Talent Management: The War for Talent and the Human Resource View

There are many different definitions of talent management across the scholarly and professional literature. There are reasons for this variation, including the nature of the organization to which it is being applied, the varied definitions of the individual terms "talent" and "management", and the range of human resource terms that have evolved over time such as "human resource planning" and "succession planning" (Singh, 2021). The concept of talent management is growing in the academic world, but originated in the business world and is still more widely publicized by business, management and leadership publications (Al Ariss et al., 2014). The Society of Human Resource Managers (SHRM) defines talent management as the activities designed to attract, develop, retain and use employees with the necessary skills and aptitude to meet the current and future needs of a business (Gurchiek, 2006). While generally useful, this definition is broad and differs from scholarly definitions that allow for more specific application in practice, and that provide potentially fruitful pathways for research.

Among the most frequently cited scholars of talent management in the global literature, Collings & Mellahi (2009) wrote:

> We define strategic talent management as activities and processes that involve the systematic identification of key positions which differentially contribute to the organisation's sustainable competitive advantage, the development of a talent pool of high potential and high performing incumbents to fill these roles, and the development of a differentiated human resource architecture to facilitate filling these positions with competent incumbents and to ensure their continued commitment to the organisation. In this regard, it is important to note that key positions are not necessarily restricted to the top management team (TMT) but also include key positions at levels lower than the TMT and may vary between operating units and indeed over time (p. 304).

One reason this definition is important within the literature is because of its inclusion of the critical element of an organization's sustainable competitive advantage. When talent management is understood as a source of value to an organization (a driver of higher profits for a corporation, for example), it receives attention and investments from senior leadership (Collings & Mellahi, 2009; Pfeffer, 1985). Another important nuance of this definition, and the reason for selecting it as the prevailing definition for this study, is the acknowledgement of the importance of key positions at levels lower than the top management team. Within universities, this would include many newly hired professional staff members who are currently absent from the scholarly conversation of talent management in higher education. While not yet addressed by scholars in the literature, others have noted the unequal attention given to faculty and senior leadership development within higher education (Ayo, 2021; Selingo, 2020). As a potential symptom of a larger issue affecting the workforce at large, undervaluing professional staff in the general higher education discourse could be a factor in the high rates of attrition currently affecting university campuses (Bessette, 2020; Pfeffer, 2018). Including this population of employees in the definition serves as an invitation to include them in the exploration of how organizations are, or are not, applying talent management practices as comprehensively as they could be, especially on university campuses (Ayo, 2021; Bessette, 2020).

The so called "War for Talent," a concept first published by the consulting firm McKinsey & Co., has existed for decades as a descriptor for the increased competition among organizations to attract and retain valuable employees (Michaels et al., 2001). Many private-sector companies fight this ongoing war by appealing to potential and current employees with attractive value propositions such as prestigious corporate branding. Some also fight the war with sophisticated talent management strategies, including loyalty-inspiring onboarding, career development, and employee retention programming. As colleges and universities evolved as complex organizations, it is unclear whether the sector has engaged in these battles with similarly effective tactics, as staff attrition may be considered an acceptable norm within higher education (Lynch, 2007). Contrary to the attraction some employees find in the talent management efforts of some corporations, many university employees find their best option for advancing their careers to be leaving one institution for another, or leaving higher education all together, and many universities seem more willing to accept that as the nature of the higher education landscape than to invest in talent management efforts (Bessette, 2020).

The War for Talent is described as creating a new reality for business that is no less apparent within higher education institutions facing similar growth and competitive pressures, and similar reliance on professional staff for organizational viability. For example, Michaels and colleagues (2001) compare the old reality with the new in the following table:

Table 3

Old Reality vs. New Reality in the War for Talent

The Old Reality	**The New Reality**
People need companies	Companies need people
Machines, capital, and geography are the competitive advantage	Talented people are the competitive advantage
Better talent makes some difference	Better talent makes a huge difference
Jobs are scarce	Talented people are scarce
Employers are loyal and jobs are secure	People are mobile and their commitment is short term
People accept the standard package they are offered	People demand much more

When the concept of talent management was first introduced two decades ago, many of the companies that were studied had not yet made the connection between better talent management and better business performance and had failed to make talent-building a priority (Michaels et al., 2001). Since then, talent management has become an industry of its own as some companies, certainly not all, have benefitted from embracing the approach (McDonnell et al., 2017). Unfortunately, when it comes to non-faculty professional staff, higher education appears to be operating in the old reality even as, “They face pressures to become more accountable, businesslike, and market-oriented in service to individuals, communities, government and industry” (Bolman & Gallos, 2021, p. 9). The War for Talent was written with corporate audiences in mind and therefore does not acknowledge the key idiosyncrasies of higher education such as the historical differences between faculty and staff roles. Nevertheless, in the current context of record-setting resignations in higher education (Lewis, 2022), the book is highly relevant to this study.

Bolman & Gallos (2021) write about four “frames” to assist academic leaders consider approaching modern institutional challenges with refreshed thinking. Their idea of reframing leadership challenges as structural, political, human resource and/or symbolic attempts to help their readers understand academic leadership and respond to challenges of institutional complexity (Bolman & Gallos, 2021). In fairness to the authors, they encourage the application of multiple frames as complex academic challenges are addressed by leaders (Bolman & Gallos, 2021).

One methodological approach described by Bolman & Gallos with the potential to help leaders in higher education better understand and address opportunities to manage talent within non-faculty professional staff is the Human Resource View of Academic Leadership (Bolman & Gallos, 2021). While this approach has strengths that are potentially applicable to talent management strategies because of the shared emphasis on people and the relationships between people and organizations, it also has significant limitations that could pose challenges to leaders within the higher education sector attempting to implement each aspect.

When considering the topic of talent management within non-faculty professional staff in higher education, the Human Resource View of Academic Leadership is particularly relevant because, “It focuses on the symbiotic relationship between people and organizations. Organizations and people need each other. But aligning human and institutional needs is never easy and people problems regularly rank high on the list of leaders’ toughest challenges” (Bolman & Gallos, 2021, p. 105). Like talent management, the Human Resource View emphasizes coaching and mentoring of employees as tools that may ultimately reward leaders and organizations with higher levels of employee engagement, satisfaction, and productivity, while reducing turnover (Bolman & Deal, 2017; Pfeffer, 2007, 2018).

Like the limitations of The War for Talent, the central critique of the Human Resource View of Academic Leadership relates to the unique governance and operating models of colleges and universities. The theory of the Human Resource View is aspirational in its description of the ideal relationships between individuals, and between individuals and organizations. Bringing this theory into practice would require individuals to share values, in a way that the extended family metaphor relies on shared values that family members have. However, at least partly due to three defining characteristics of colleges and universities, shared values are not easily achieved: 1) Universities are famously "loosely coupled systems" (Bastedo et al., 2016); 2) Critical stakeholders – faculty members – can sometimes align with their discipline more closely than their institution (Ehrenberg, 2000); and 3) Higher education leaders are not typically trained in management or leadership before assuming such roles (Gmelch, 2002).

Ideally, leadership would be shared throughout the institution. However, as other scholars explain, "While the idea of shared governance is common to the academic arena, shared leadership is not, and traditional forms of shared governance are not substitutes for shared leadership" (Bastedo et al., 2016, p.180). Unlike Michaels, et al. (2001), Bolman & Gallos (2021) write specifically about higher education leadership. Examined together, the work of these authors illuminate a concerning gap in how talent is managed within higher education, particularly at levels lower than senior leadership.

Onboarding

Collings & Mellahi (2009) define onboarding through two critical components: the development of a talent pool and ensuring continued commitment to the organization.

Onboarding is typically owned by HR, and is the common term used within the talent management literature to describe efforts to engage and retain employees through early efforts of organizational socialization (Allen, 2006). Effective onboarding programs have the potential to catalyze employee engagement and organizational commitment early in one's journey (Maurer, 2021). This is a critical time because voluntary turnover is often highest among new employees (Allen, 2006; Snell, 2006). Specific onboarding tactics vary among organizations, however the general effort to quickly build new hire engagement, role clarity, and sense of belonging is acknowledged as an important component of an effective talent management strategy (T. Bauer, 2010; Snell, 2006; Welbourne et al., 2017).

Organizations compete for talent and the knowledge, skills, and abilities new employees bring with them. Those organizations that can access the power of their new talent faster can create a competitive advantage. That competitive advantage can be measured in real business results. Specifically related to the crisis of resignations, organizations that focus on onboarding reported a 91 percent retention rate, versus 30 percent for firms that are considered "laggards" in onboarding efforts (Bauer, 2013).

Scholars draw important distinctions between onboarding and orientation programs, as the terms and intentions can be confused in practice (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). As opposed to the procedural emphasis of orientation programs, onboarding is a long-term process involving a range of stakeholders to help the new employee understand their role and the organization, and to build goodwill and loyalty (Meyer & Bartels, 2017; SHRM, *Understanding Employee Onboarding*, 2021). Organizations and leaders who confuse orientation for onboarding could be unwittingly missing the opportunity to address one of the key drivers of voluntary turnover among professional staff members in higher education, role ambiguity (Curran & Prottas, 2017).

Unlike orientation activities, onboarding begins the extended process of establishing job embeddedness which is an important factor for why employees choose to remain in their jobs rather than voluntarily leave. The onboarding process aims to create a sense of belonging and attachment to the organization by addressing three key dimensions of job embeddedness: links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001). Onboarding activities establish links to internal employee networks. By connecting new hires with key individuals and building a supportive network, onboarding contributes to their social integration and sense of belonging. These links play a crucial role in job embeddedness, as employees who have strong social connections are less likely to consider leaving the organization. Onboarding also addresses the notion of fit, which refers to the alignment between the individual's values, skills, and goals and the organization's culture and mission. This alignment of values and mission contributes to employees feeling a stronger sense of attachment to the organization. The concept of job embeddedness recognizes that employees may be hesitant to leave an organization if they have made significant personal and professional sacrifices to join and fit into it. Effective onboarding goes beyond a checklist of tasks and considers the professional growth and development of new hires. By providing opportunities for skill-building and career advancement, the onboarding process creates an environment where employees feel invested in their roles and the organization's success. These investments of time, effort, and professional development make employees less likely to consider leaving, reinforcing their job embeddedness. All of these aspects of job embeddedness move beyond orientation and have the potential to improve employee retention in organizations that understand and execute well-designed onboarding programs.

Bauer (2010) described short- and long-term beneficial outcomes for organizations that approach onboarding effectively, including phases described as the Four C's – Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection. Compliance is the most basic level, often referred to as "orientation." This phase is typically limited to explaining and clarifying legal policies, procedures, and regulations that are important and might be unique to an organization or industry. Clarification emphasizes systems, processes, roles, responsibilities, and job performance expectations. The next two phases are where most organizations fall short, according to Bauer (2010). The Culture phase introduces the organization's history, traditions, values, philosophy, and norms. This is especially important in higher education because of the importance of traditions and the differences in governance structures compared to many other sectors (Birnbaum, 1988). The final phase of Connection is the most integrative level and is where the formation of informal and formal relationships within the organization occurs. These relationships are critical to building organizational commitment and a sense of belonging (Bauer, 2010; Curran et al., 2017). While each of the four C's is important, some have greater potential to create positive outcomes. Organizations that are able to leverage the power of connection during onboarding by specifically identifying answers to the who, what, when, and where for connecting established and new employees benefit in a variety of ways, including decreased turnover (Bauer, 2013). Employees who feel connected and accepted in their new roles have less initial anxiety upon entering the new organization. When new employees feel more connected, they are more likely to take risks, ask questions, and are more open to learning about their new role, colleagues, and organization. According to Bauer (2013), connection can be the foundation upon which effective onboarding is built, although it is the least commonly integrated aspect.

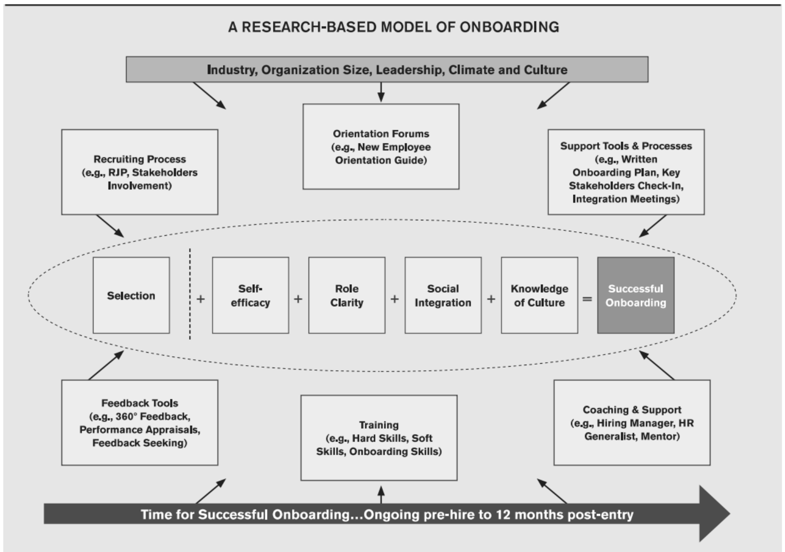
Organizations able to effectively coordinate all four aspects of onboarding enjoy positive new employee outcomes, such as consistently higher job satisfaction, higher productivity, and lower turnover than organizations that fail to deliver across these four onboarding dimensions (Bauer, 2010). Organizations considered in the top 20 percent in terms of onboarding had 91 percent first year retention, and 62 percent of new employees reached their first-year goals. Conversely, the bottom 30 percent of organizations reported only 30 percent retention and 17 percent goal completion for the same time frame (T. N. Bauer et al., 2007).

Short-term outcomes of effective onboarding include self-efficacy, role clarity, social integration, and knowledge and fit within an organizational culture. Each play a role in an employee's decision to remain in a role or to voluntarily depart (Allen, 2006; T. Bauer, 2010; Kumar, 2022). Long-term outcomes described by Bauer (2010) include higher job satisfaction and organizational commitment, which are also related to an employee's decision to remain in a role or voluntarily depart (Allen, 2006; T. Bauer, 2010; Kumar, 2022).

Taken together, a research-based onboarding program that is designed to produce those short- and long-term outcomes (see Figure 1) has the potential to reduce some of the most frustrating role stressors for higher education professional staff – role ambiguity, role conflict, and a sense of overload (Curran & Prottas, 2017). Research-based onboarding programs such as this also have the potential for positive effects on some of the factors driving the crisis of higher education professional staff attrition, including job satisfaction, organizational commitment and stress (Bauer, 2010). The research-based model of onboarding is illustrated in the graphic below from Bauer (2010):

Figure 2

A Research-Based Model of Onboarding



Universities as Increasingly Complex and Corporatized Organizations

It is understood that universities and companies are different types of organizations and should not be compared in every aspect (Weber, 2005). However, it is also established that the practices of talent management and onboarding can be helpful tools in addressing a major challenge that is shared between both types of organizations, staff attrition. The organizational complexity of corporations and universities justify the exploration of common solutions to this shared challenge (Gross, 1968).

As scholars have examined the definitions of complex organizations, it has become more evident that modern colleges and universities share many operational and bureaucratic elements with corporations (Birnbaum, 1988). When considering the structure and functioning of an organization, consider the commonalities between corporations and modern universities:

> The business of the organization be conducted on a continuous basis; that there be a hierarchy of offices, with each office under the control of a higher one; that this hierarchy

entail a systematic division of labor based on specialized training and expertise; and that the division of labor specify the area of action for which the official is competent, the responsibilities he or she has in this regard, and the amount of his or her power or authority (Perrow, 2014, p. 47).

Scholars have noted – often with frustration – that higher education continues to become more corporatized as opportunities for additional revenues have become available (Bok, 2003; Steck, 2003). There are many reasons for this shift in direction which some lament as a dilution of the fundamental academic values of academic freedom, academic integrity, and scholarly values (Holbrook, 2004). Those reasons include significant pressures on universities to replace revenues lost to declining government funding, and to adopt a customer-centric approach to student satisfaction for the sake of rankings and accreditation (Holbrook, 2004; Steck, 2003). Despite concerns about the corporatization of higher education, the pressures for financial viability and reputation and standing are shared between the two sectors. These shared challenges have external implications for higher education, such as adopting more market and market-like behaviors such as competing for external funds and commercializing intellectual property for profit as a type of academic capitalism (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001). There are also internal implications for higher education, including the increased number and specializations of non-faculty professional staff required to manage a more diverse set of corporate-like initiatives such as enrollment management and student experience coordination (Slaughter & Leslie, 2001; Steck, 2003).

To be clear, this research is not intended to take a position on the corporatization of higher education. Whether corporatization is a favorable or unfavorable trend is not the focus of this study. The trend, itself, is a matter of fact that has been the subject of many scholars for several years (Bok, 2003; Ginsberg, 2011; Slaughter & Leslie, 2001; Steck, 2003). Much of the scholarly criticism of the increased corporatization of higher education has to do with the perception of decreased humanity that has come along with a businesslike approach (Catropa & Andrews, 2013). This criticism is applied internally to the way some universities treat faculty and staff as budget line items, as well as externally to the shift towards categorizing students as customers (Bok, 2003; Catropa & Andrews, 2013). While, again, not taking a position on the overall trend of corporatization being a positive or negative direction, this study does align with the perspective that humanity in higher education matters. If universities are able to help new staff employees feel valued in their roles through effective onboarding practices, those employees who lead critical student-facing programming initiatives have a better chance to share that humanity with our students (Hirsch, 2017; Meyer & Bartels, 2017).

Given the trend towards corporatization, it stands to reason why colleges and universities have become home to non-faculty professional staff members seeking to build careers in higher education administration, just as professionals build careers in other types of complex organizations like corporations. On many large college campuses, non-faculty professional staff outnumber faculty members, heightening the importance of examining their experiences as employees (Smerek & Peterson, 2006). One example that stands out due to their reputation for academic emphasis is Yale University where it was reported that their administration has grown in size by 44.7% since 2003, and in 2021 that they employed 5,066 professional staff compared to 4,937 faculty members (Mousavizadeh, 2021).

The term "professional staff" refers generally to non-academic university employees, although there is still active debate about how to accurately describe these professionals from their faculty colleagues (Sebalj et al., 2012). Colleges and universities have become complex organizations with complex governance structures, dependent on a variety of critical roles that have evolved from the all-inclusive leadership of faculty members, to include professional staff members. Sometimes these contributors are referred to as administrators, or simply as staff, as a distinction between their roles and the roles of the faculty who are dedicated to research and/or delivering academic content. This distinction has increased in importance as the purposes of the institutions have evolved from the boarding school model, which relied almost exclusively on faculty members to educate and discipline students, to the modern full-service models, which operate as much like businesses as academic institutions, as they sometimes have sophisticated operating structures and compete for students by offering premium amenities and an engaging student life experience (Bastedo et al., 2016). However, the origins of America's colonial colleges still dominate some aspects of how modern institutions operate, despite their complexities. This can be a frustration for administrators attempting to manage in a modern context, while institutions cling to governance structures conceived when colleges were smaller, simpler, and managed by faculty who were responsible for every aspect of the operation. In highlighting challenges of governance in modern academic institutions, Birnbaum (1988) explained:

> The days of amateur administration when faculty temporarily assumed administrative positions and then returned to the classroom are long over at most institutions. As institutions become larger and more complex, knowledge of legal precedents, federal regulations, management information systems, student financial aid procedures, grant and contract administration, and many other areas of specialized expertise is needed to accomplish many administrative tasks (p. 7).

The importance of professional staff is also apparent in the current competitive context of the higher education landscape (Bolman & Gallos, 2021). Universities increasingly compete for students, and are also assessed by a variety of external stakeholders such as donors and accrediting bodies, based on outputs that are managed by professional staff such as student engagement (Curran & Prottas, 2017). The student engagement example is one among many that has internal mission-related implications as well. Scholars have consistently found that students who are more engaged through campus initiatives often developed and led by professional staff are more likely to thrive academically and graduate, compared to students who are not beneficiaries of such engagement programming (Becker et al., 2009; Light, 2004, Wolniak et al., 2016).

As the importance of professional staff roles becomes more apparent, so does the crisis created by the rapid resignations across campuses (Zahneis, 2022). Challenges underlying this crisis include stressors that are unique to higher education staff such as the extent of role and organizational ambiguity in such loosely coupled organizations (Bastedo et al., 2016; Curran & Prottas, 2017). Another unique stressor for higher education professional staff is the deeply unequal workplaces university campuses can be (Selingo, 2020). This dynamic between faculty and professional staff was on stark display during the peak of the COVID-19 crisis and has been a significant driver of the Great Resignation on campuses since the summer of 2020 (Ayo, 2021; Bessette, 2020; Selingo, 2020).

So why are campus leaders not implementing tactics that could be effective in increasing professional staff engagement and reducing unwanted turnover in important positions? The answer is likely more complicated than simply resistance to the corporatization of higher education. Bolman & Gallos (2021) remind us that most academic leaders are trained in their academic disciplines with an emphasis on developing expertise in research and teaching, without the requisite training in management where lessons on talent management would be taught. They cite a study led by Gmelch (2002) of 2,000 academic leaders in the United States over a ten-year period which found that 3 percent had received any type of leadership training or preparation. This gap in leadership training among higher education leaders is potentially related to the gap in scholarly leadership related to this topic.

Talent Management in Higher Education Faculty and Professional Staff

As noted, talent management is a growing body of scholarly literature, but the majority of the literature still exists in business publications because the topic is an outgrowth of business practices related to Human Resource Management (Al Ariss et al., 2014). Logically, then, most talent management scholarly research is aimed in the direction of traditional businesses where the research implications may be most directly applicable. However, university leaders increasingly experience the challenges associated with retaining faculty and staff talent, there is a growing body of research focused on managing talent within higher education.

Talent Management – The Faculty

Within the context of higher education, the limited research in talent management is largely aimed at faculty, such as succession planning for academic department chairs and deans (Bisbee, 2005; Bryman, 2007). Bisbee (2005) identified several challenges that organizations face in faculty talent management. These challenges include the shortage of qualified faculty, the high cost of faculty recruitment and retention, and the need to attract and retain faculty from diverse backgrounds. To address these challenges, Bisbee (2005) argues that an institution should develop a strong brand and a clear value proposition for faculty, invest in faculty talent development programs, and create a positive work environment that includes competitive salary and benefits for faculty.

Bryman (2007) provides a literature review of scholarly research focused on faculty talent management. The findings build on those of Bisbee (2005) by exploring various definitions of talent management and calling scholarly attention to the need to establish greater consensus on the term in the field of higher education faculty. Both authors agree with the main themes of the challenges and opportunities facing higher education institutions in retaining and developing faculty talent.

Although they may outnumber faculty members, professional staff are frequently treated as less valued employees compared to their faculty colleagues on university campuses. Examples of differential treatment are found in salary adjustments, benefits packages, paid-time-off policies, and at times basic respectful treatment (Ayo, 2021; Bessette, 2020; Selingo, 2020). According to Krebs (2003), chairwoman of the English department at Wheaton College:

> Colleges are set up, I have observed, to encourage faculty members to think of ourselves as the center of the enterprise, the reason all of the others, including the students, are there. The result can be that we end up viewing other college employees the way upper-class Victorians thought of their servants. We ignore them when they are doing their jobs well. We talk in front of them as if they cannot hear us. We assume that they will work consistently to make our lives easier. And we are sure that they understand that the real point of the institution is what we do.

This begins to explain why and how there is such a gap in the literature specifically addressing talent management within higher education professional staff.

Talent Management – Professional Staff

Curran and Prottas (2017) are among few who have written about the intersection of talent management and higher education professional staff. They examined data provided by 349 staff members from 17 US higher education institutions, specifically inquiring about the relationship between role stressors and work engagement. Curran and Prottas (2017) defined three role stressors for higher education professional staff as role ambiguity, role conflict, and role overload. They found that the presence of these role stressors leads to feelings of pressure and strain on staff members, depleting energy and leading to negative sentiments and feelings towards leaders and institutions. Their findings indicated that one stressor, role ambiguity, had the strongest inverse relationship with work engagement. They summarized that when a staff member's task expectations were inadequately or vaguely conveyed, they were likely to become unsure as to where to direct effort. This led to lower levels of work engagement and higher likelihood of employee turnover. Given the emphasis on role ambiguity provided by the research of Curran and Prottas (2017), and the potential mitigation of role ambiguity by the including of Clarity as a priority in best-practice onboarding (Bauer, 2010), this work on role stressors and organizational engagement is of special interest to this study.

Also of special interest to this study is the work of scholars who have contributed to the literature through their dissertations. Riccio (2010) examined seven small to mid-size private universities and their efforts to implement talent management programs for supervisors and administrative staff. Leadership development programs such as the Excellence Through Leadership (ETL) program at Emory University were included in this research and found to be effective in engaging and retaining high-potential managers (Riccio, 2010). This study took an important step in addressing the paucity of talent management research focused on higher education professional staff. However, its focus on employees who had already established a two-way organizational commitment by being identified as emerging leaders left the gap addressing newly hired employees still unfilled.

Woodard (2013) built on this work by leading an Action Research (AR) Case Study focusing on Strategic Talent Management and the role of the university Chief Business Officer (CBO), one of the most important and senior roles among professional staff. In addition to demonstrating the effectiveness of Strategic Talent Management on the development of the CBO, this study underscored the importance of succession planning at senior levels to ensure continuity among key leadership roles (Woodard, 2013).

While Woodard's work provided a unique view into the importance of succession planning for a senior staff leader, Keller (2018) researched succession planning pilot programs across the University of Minnesota State Colleges and University system, rather than focusing on a singular role. This study thoroughly explained the leadership crisis facing higher education administrators, and linked succession planning practices to the potential to mitigate this crisis. Through interviews with the Chief Human Resource Officer (CHRO) and other senior leaders, challenges and opportunities with succession planning were identified and the value of Strategic Talent Management for professional staff was reiterated (Keller, 2018).

Riccio, Woodard and Keller provide insights into a rarely explored segment of talent within higher education, the non-faculty professional staff. However, these scholars limit their focus to mid-career leadership development and senior-level succession planning. They do not address a critical component of the Collings & Mellahi (2009) talent management definition which is, "it is important to note that key positions are not necessarily restricted to the top management team (TMT) but also include key positions at levels lower than the TMT and may vary between operating units and indeed over time" (p. 304). Lower-level professional staff employees in higher education remain unexplored in the context of talent management.

Considering talent management activities on a spectrum that reflects a professional staff employee's career journey, onboarding would be at the beginning, leadership development programs would be at the mid-career stage for high-potential employees and succession planning would be for senior leaders (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). The conversation in the literature has begun with dissertations published on the topics of mid-career staff and leadership development programs (Riccio 2010), and senior leaders and succession planning (Woodard 2013; Keller 2018).

The literature is limited when considering new non-faculty professional staff employees and their onboarding experiences in higher education, however as Curran and Prottas (2017) demonstrate, the research that has begun suggests that this could be a fruitful area for future scholarly exploration. As another example of serious thought in this area, Hall-Jones et al. (2018) make a substantial contribution to the scholarly discussion of onboarding early-career higher education staff members with a well-structured case summary of practices at Ohio University. Shared values are emphasized throughout a five-day onboarding process rooted in the theoretical basis of the human resource frame (Bolman & Deal, 2017). This people-centric approach positions Ohio University as an uncommon example of an institution prioritizing staff development at its earliest stage. However the view of Hall-Jones et al. (2018) is from the employee and manager perspective, rather than the institutions strategic leaders, which is where a scholarly gap exists.

Given the limited attention to the experiences of newly hired professional staff employees**,** this study will contribute to the general bodies of scholarly literature in higher education on talent management and its specific component of onboarding. Specifically, it will address gaps in the existing literature related to the onboarding experiences of newly hired professional staff and how universities can and should view developing professional staff talent as a strategic imperative, beginning early in the career journey.

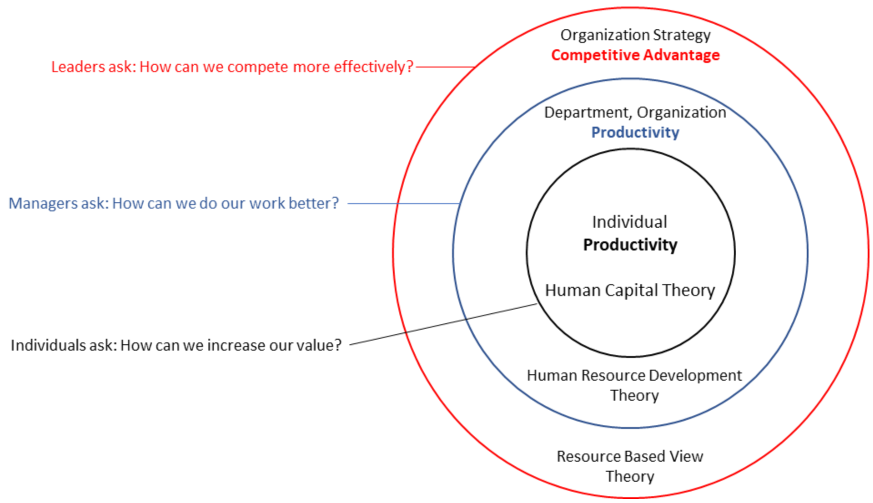
Theoretical Frameworks: Resource Based View Theory, Informed by Human Capital Theory and Human Resource Development Theory

The research for this study is mainly informed by the Resource Based View (RBV), which asserts that an organization's internal resources, such as its talent pool (human resources), can be leveraged as a source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Rothaermel, 2013). This theory is largely based on the research of Jay Barney (1991). Other scholars such as Wernerfelt (1995) and Rothaermel (2013) have contributed to the evolution of the RBV because of the significant interest in understanding sources of competitive advantage for various types of organizations.

However, before discussing the RBV theory in detail, it is important to explore other theoretical frameworks that inform this study and guide the research in a unique direction. Human Capital Theory, developed first through the work of Gary Becker and Theodore Schultz, is an economic theory that argues that individuals invest in their own skills and knowledge in order to increase their individual productivity and earnings (G. S. Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961). Moving the research perspective from the individual to the department, product, or service level, Human Resource Development Theory emphasizes improving employee and organizational productivity through training and development programs (Swanson, 2001). These theoretical frameworks provide a nucleus for this study to build upon by further expanding the research perspective from individual and departmental productivity to the Resource Based View, which focuses on the strategic objective of establishing competitive advantages for institutions. The figure below illustrates the relationship and differences between these three important theories:

Figure 3

Relationship Between Theoretical Frameworks



Human Capital Theory

Human capital theory is a well-established concept in economics and labor market analysis that emphasizes the role of education, skills, and knowledge as valuable assets that individuals possess. The theory posits that investments in human capital, such as education and training, can lead to increased productivity, higher earning potential, and overall economic growth. This investment in human capital is analogous to the investment in physical capital, such as machinery and technology, which were previously thought to be the primary drivers for economic growth (G. S. Becker, 1993; Schultz, 1961).

An individual’s education is a central component of human capital theory. The theory suggests that acquiring more education and training can lead to an increase in an individual's productivity and income. As individuals gain more knowledge and skills, they become more adaptable and able to respond to the demands of an ever-changing labor market (G. S. Becker, 1993; Weiss, 2015).

Human capital theory suggests that higher levels of education and training lead to increased productivity for individual workers. A skilled workforce can perform tasks more efficiently and effectively, leading to improved organizational performance and economic growth. Additionally, individuals with greater levels of education and training tend to earn higher wages due to their enhanced productivity and greater value to employers (G. S. Becker, 1993).

Since human capital is not a fixed asset it can be continuously developed and improved over an individual's lifetime. Therefore, the theory encourages the idea of lifelong learning, where individuals engage in continuous education and skill development to stay relevant and competitive in the job market (G. S. Becker, 1993). Human capital theory is an important framework for analyzing how organizational talent is valued and developed. Human capital theory examines the benefits of education and training as a form of investment in human resources, proposing that people are a form of capital that can be developed. Education and training are seen as investments that prepare the labor force and increase the productivity of individuals and organizations (Nafukho et al., 2004). Because human capital theory aims much of its focus at improving the productivity of workers through training, rather than examining talent management holistically as a potential source of competitive advantage, the theory is not perfectly congruent with the purpose of this study. However, the applicability of human capital theory to this study is apparent when future implications are considered. In other words, once an organization recognizes its talent as a sustainable competitive advantage and is organized to invest in that talent, those investments must be made in human capital at all levels, including training and development of individual employees beyond the onboarding stage. As stated by Nafukho et al. (2004), the main outcome from investing in human capital is the improved performance of the individual, which in turn leads to improved productivity at the organizational level. As it relates to this study, human capital theory affirms the value of employee talent and could help frame expectations of long-term benefits to the university of operating with an RBV perspective. Together, the theories provide a more comprehensive, longer-term view than either theory alone.

Human Resource Development Theory

Expanding on the emphasis of individual development at the heart of Human Capital Theory, Human Resource Development (HRD) Theory invites a broader view. While this theory can be viewed as broadly as the organizational lens, the critical application areas for HRD typically include specific areas within an organization such as human resource management, individual career development, and individual product/service quality improvement (Swanson, 2001).

HRD is a process of developing and unleashing expertise for the purpose of improving performance (Swanson, 2008). The levels of performance that potentially benefit from HRD include the organization, process, group, and individual levels. The primary components of HRD include organization development, the process of systematically implementing organizational change for the purpose of improving performance, and training and development, which refers to the process of systematically developing expertise in individuals for the purpose of improving performance (Swanson, 2008).

Like Human Capital Theory, HRD emphasizes lifelong learning for individuals. However, the underlying benefit from the HRD perspective is increased productivity of the organization, rather than a primary emphasis on increased competency and value for the individual. Swanson (2008) writes, “Human expertise that is developed and maximized through HRD processes should be done for the mutual long-term and/or short-term benefits of the sponsoring organization and the individuals involved” (p. 2).

While performance improvement for individuals and in specific areas is important, HRD theory would not adequately address one of the objectives of this study which seeks to understand how a university does or does not value the employee segment of early career non-faculty professional staff, not only in terms of increased productivity, but as a potential source of institutional competitive advantage.

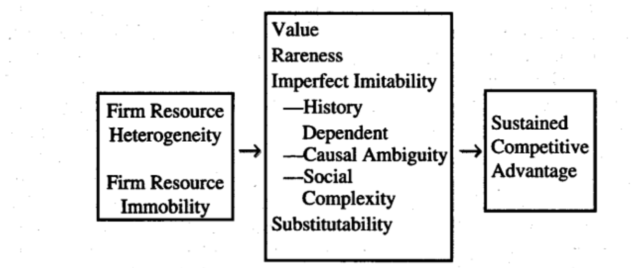
Resource Based View (RBV) Theory

Competitive advantage is an important concept within RBV and in the general landscape of organizational performance. Barney (1991) describes competitive advantage as something an organization is able to do to create more value than its competitors. To remain viable in competitive environments, all organizations need some type of competitive advantage. The RBV provides a rationale and framework for organizations to look internally for opportunities to position their existing resources as sources of sustainable competitive advantage. In other words, if a university views its staff as a key resource and invests in their development strategically, that staff could become an advantage for attracting and supporting students more effectively than other universities.

The RBV is defined by its emphasis on internal resources and a specific framework for analyzing those resources as potential competitive advantages. Internal resources can be classified as tangible, intangible, physical, human, and organizational (Barney, 1991). The RBV is further defined by its framework for determining if an organization’s internal resources are sources of competitive advantage. Figure 1 illustrates how Barney (1991) initially defined this framework as VRIN to assess if resources are valuable, rare, costly to imitate, and non-substitutable. Figure 2 illustrates how Rothaermel (2013) built on this foundational definition by amending the framework to its current form of VRIO by adding the question, "Is a company organized to capture value from these resources?" (Rothaermel, 2013).

Figure 4

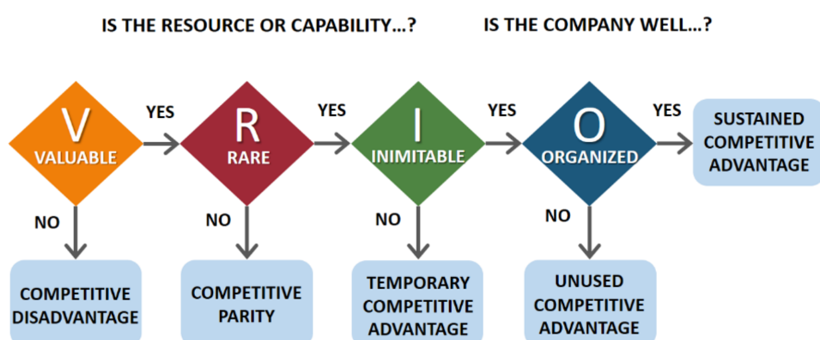
Original VRIN Theoretical Framework



Source: Barney (1991)

Figure 5

Resource Based View (VRIO) Theoretical Framework



Source: Rothaermel's (2013) 'Strategic Management', p.91

Barney (1991) and Rothaermel (2013) provide clarifying descriptions of the VRIO framework. An organization's internal resources are considered valuable in the RBV context if they increase differentiation from alternatives enough for customers to perceive value. Internal resources and capabilities are considered rare when they are unique to an organization or not easily acquired by competitors. If the internal resource meets the criteria of being valuable and rare it can be considered at least a temporary competitive advantage. Further, if the resource is costly to imitate or substitute, it has the potential be leveraged as a competitive advantage if the organization is positioned to take advantage of it. This is the main distinction between the original RBV framework designed by Barney (1991) and the current framework authored by Rothaermel (2013). The internal resources are not sufficient on their own to become sustainable competitive advantages for organizations. The organization must be capable of recognizing and exploiting the internal resources with these attributes to capture the value and establish sustainable competitive advantages.

This study presumes that as colleges and universities have evolved into complex organizations that face some of the same competitive pressures as corporations, campus leaders are seeking to understand ways to establish and exploit competitive advantages that make their institutions attractive to students and responsive to other stakeholders such as accrediting bodies and alumni. Strategic talent management, as defined by Collings and Mellahi (2009), contributes to an organization's competitive advantage by developing its talent pool at all levels. More specifically, effective onboarding practices as a component of a talent management approach can increase organizational commitment and retention of newly hired professionals (Allen, 2006; Bauer 2010). The inclusion of an organization's competitive advantage in the Collings and Mellahi (2009) definition of strategic talent management is an important connection to the definition of RBV and its application to this study. Competitive advantage is essential in both definitions.

Human resource-centric theories are important for understanding implications for individuals and groups such as employees and human resource teams. This study, however, seeks to identify potential gaps and opportunities at the organizational level related to how or if talent management is considered a competitive advantage. Therefore the RBV appears to provide a more focused theoretical lens than human resource-centric theories for an immediate perspective on this study's research questions. Human Capital Theory provides an important framework for considering longer-term implications on talent management, career development and organizational effectiveness once organizations have established talent management as a sustainable competitive advantage through a Resource Based View.

The RBV applies to the central question of this study by providing the VRIO framework as an analytical tool for assessing the internal resource of professional staff talent as a potential competitive advantage for an institution. Further, if the potential exists for this segment of talent to be leveraged as a competitive advantage, the RBV and VIRO framework require an examination of the organization's capabilities and efforts to recognize exploit the competitive advantage. To put a fine point on it, does the institution value new staff members who are often the caretakers of the student experience? If the institution intends to answer that question in the affirmative, then its actions should match that intention. The institution should invest in retaining and developing these professionals. The earliest possible opportunity to begin this investment is during their onboarding experience. The following table illustrates how the aspects of the RBV theory (the VRIO framework) align to the specific segment of non-faculty professional staff members in higher education.

Table 4

Resourced Based View Alignment with Non-Faculty Staff

Resource Based View Framework	**Meaning (Rothaermel, 2013)**	**Hypotheses related to Higher Education Non-Faculty Staff**
Valuable	Resources are valuable if they help organizations to increase the value offered to the customers.	Staff are often responsible for critical university services such as student success initiatives.
Rare	Resources that can only be acquired by one or few companies are considered rare.	Employees can only work for one institution at a time. Effective onboarding can increase organizational commitment and decrease turnover.
Imitable	The resource must be costly to imitate or to substitute for a rival.	Recruiting, hiring, training, and replacing employees is costly. Prioritization of staff onboarding as a source of competitive advantage would be a culture shift, difficult to imitate by other institutions.
Organizational	Only the institution that is capable of exploiting the valuable, rare and imitable resources can achieve sustained competitive advantage.	If the above are true, is the institution positioned to leverage the competitive advantage by investing in best-practice onboarding programming?

Summary

This literature review explores scholarly research on the topic of talent management and its application to non-faculty professional staff in higher education. In doing so, this literature review substantiates the significance of this study by highlighting that little emphasis has been devoted to early-career professionals in higher education, which is a population of professional staff members who are resigning from universities in record numbers.

By beginning with the broad topic of talent management, this literature review establishes the credibility of the subject by citing publications from business literature in addition to scholarly research. Of the many definitions reviewed, the Collings & Mellahi (2009) interpretation was selected for this study because of its inclusion of levels of employees lower than the top management team (TMT), and because of its inclusion of the strategic imperative of establishing a competitive advantage for organizations. The inclusion employees lower than the TMT invites the exploration of early phases of the talent management process, including new employee onboarding. This literature review includes a specific exploration of onboarding as a component of strategic talent management and highlights best practices identified by experts in the field.

To substantiate the argument that strategic talent management can be applied to higher education institutions, this literature review includes voices from higher education literature that describe colleges and universities as complex organizations that can, in some ways, compare to corporations where strategic talent management is typically applied. Importantly, this is not to make an argument for or about the corporatization of higher education. Rather, it is intended only to compare the importance of people, or talent, in both settings.

The study of talent management in higher education is often focused on faculty promotion and tenure. This is discussed briefly; however the emphasis of this literature review is on non-faculty professional staff. Studies are reviewed that examine professional staff talent management in the context of mid-career development and senior-staff succession planning. Onboarding of newly hired staff was found to be a topic receiving little attention in the literature.

The research for this study is mainly informed by the Resource Based View (RBV), which asserts that an organization’s internal resources, such as its talent pool (human resources), can be leveraged as a source of competitive advantage (Barney, 1991; Rothaermel, 2013). Human Capital Theory and Human Resource Development Theory are also explored to distinguish between the application of talent management as an individual or team productivity tool, and its potential strategic application as a source of competitive advantage for an institution.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY AND CONTEXT

Methodological Approach: Qualitative Case Study

This study used a qualitative case study design to explore how staff employees at a mid-sized private university experience their onboarding into the institution because of the nature of the questions and the strengths of the approach as an in-depth study of one instance of a bounded phenomenon (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). In this case, the phenomenon was the onboarding experiences of newly hired professional staff at a mid-sized private university. Specifically, according to Marshall & Rossman (2016), a qualitative methodology is best when studying social phenomena that take place in the real world, and can be studied using methods that are interactive and humanistic. These methods included semi-structured interviews meant to encourage natural conversations as the primary tool for data collection.

Merriam (1998) explained that a case can be defined as a phenomenon of some sort occurring in a bounded context if the researcher is able to specify the phenomenon and define the boundaries. Therefore, the case study approach was appropriate for this study because of the intent to examine the phenomenon of new staff employee onboarding in the bounded context of a mid-sized private university in the Southeast and three of its campus life teams, including Student Involvement and Leadership Transitions (SILT), Residence Life, and Civic and Community Engagement (CCE). Merriam (1988) further distinguishes the case study for its distinctive attributes of particularism, description, and heurism. This study was intended to be particularistic in its focus on a particular program employing the university's onboarding activities. It is descriptive in its yielding of rich, thick descriptions of those onboarding activities as a result of personal interviews with stakeholders from the Campus Life teams, and documents from human resources. It is heuristic in its illumination of the reader's understanding of the university's onboarding practices in the context of best practices and the Resource Based View (RBV) theory.

The process and sequence of the development of this study aligned with what Merriam (1998) presents as a model for designing qualitative case study research. This process included conducting the literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying the research problem, developing the research questions and selecting the sample (Merriam, 1988). This process as defined by Merriam (1988) is noteworthy, not only for its alignment with this study, but also because of its distinction from some other thought-leading methodologists on the application of the case study methodology in the field of educational research, namely Robert K. Yin and Robert E. Stake (Yazan, 2015). The differences in processes between these methodologists reveals differences in their epistemological positions. In his comparative analysis of the approaches to case studies of Yin, Stake and Merriam, Yazan (2015) describes Merriam as most closely and consistently aligned to the constructivist paradigm because of her view that in qualitative research reality is constructed by people as they interact with their social worlds (Merriam, 1988; Yazan, 2015). Since this research sought to understand the onboarding experiences of individuals as constructed by their own interpretations, Merriam's underlying epistemological assumptions aligned best with the goals of this study.

Considering the spectrum of loose versus tight research designs as described by Miles et al. (2020), the research design for this study was intended to be tight due to the specificity of the research questions and the desire for the findings to be as transferrable as possible. In an effort to realize the benefits of a tight research design such as a manageable analytical scope, a consistent, semi-structured qualitative interview protocol was used. This provided a greater degree of clarity and focused responses than a loose research design that would require more time and has the potential to stray into questions that are ambiguous and settings that are unfamiliar, potentially resulting in data overload (Miles et al., 2020).

Additionally, this study acknowledges the importance of the specific context and setting within higher education. Talent management is typically studied in the context of a corporation where the setting is an organization seeking to operate more effectively and/or efficiently (Collings & Mellahi, 2009) . Higher education is a unique context in a few important ways. First, efficiency is not the goal of higher education in the same way it is for a for-profit business. The goal of a university is to produce ideas and solutions to societal challenges, which sometimes requires operating differently from businesses (Weber, 2005). This challenges us to ask questions in this setting that are not commonly asked, such as how non-faculty staff talent is being managed. Another difference in the context and setting of higher education compared to corporations is that the “talent” being managed is not responsible for producing a product or service, but rather they are responsible for the caretaking of students and the student experience on a university campus (Curran & Prottas, 2017; Wolniak, Flores, et al., 2016). There is an aspect of humanity that is unique in this setting, which elevates the stakes for effective talent management in higher education.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of the experiences of newly hired professional staff, hiring managers, HR professionals and others who are stakeholders in the higher education talent management process, this case study employed semi-structured individual interviews seeking to understand participant experiences during onboarding, particularly in the context of widely accepted best practices that emphasize compliance, clarification, culture and connections (Bauer, 2010). In addition to interviews, I examined relevant documents, including current HR documents and presentations used for the university's New Employee Welcome Session (NEWS). These documents assist in the understanding of organizational objectives related to the institution's onboarding approach and activities. Triangulation between these interviews and documents increased the credibility and overall trustworthiness of the findings of this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Onboarding at a Medium-Sized Private University in the Southeast

This research took place on a medium-sized, private campus in the southeastern United States that is familiar to the researcher. Like many universities, this university has been experiencing levels of turnover among junior staff that are alarming to HR and senior leadership. The benefits of access to participants, familiarity with the organization, existing credibility and trust outweighed potential risks such as ethical and political dilemmas, or uncovering damaging information (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Additionally, early conversations with senior leaders within the institution provided support for the significance and purpose of this study and ensure access to data and stakeholder time. Additional leaders who are responsible for staff and/or budgets within the university were eager to better understand this crisis that is impacting organizational effectiveness, campus culture, and finances across higher education.

Access to participants, the site, and the data were aided by some of the criteria that define me as an "insider" in this space – my relationships with the people and aligned interest in the topic as a leader within the institution (Chavez-Reyes, 2008). At the same time, the university met the criteria for a realistic site as defined by Marshall & Rossman (2016), including possible entry, a high probability of a rich mix of processes, people, programs, interactions, structures of interest, the likelihood of trusting relationships, ethical reporting conditions, and reasonable assurance of data quality and credibility. Entry was possible because of professional relationships between key stakeholders and myself. There was a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest is present because of the deliberate, theory-driven selection of the site and the within-case sample selection. Trusting relations exist with the participants in the study because of previously established relationships and the shared interest in the objective of increasing employee engagement, satisfaction, and sense of being valued by the institution. The study was conducted and reported ethically due to the university's familiarity with, and internal practices regarding, ethical research practices and the safeguards implemented by the institutional review board. Finally, data quality and credibility of the study were reasonably assured because of the importance of the topic to the institution, and because of the training and oversight of the academic professionals managing the activities and processes of the researcher. However, as an insider to the research site, I needed to practice a great deal of reflexivity throughout the process, which is addressed in the section below on trustworthiness.

Onboarding of new employees at this institution was described differently by different stakeholders, as detailed in the findings of the study. According to Human Resources, new employees are encouraged to attend a welcome session that resembles what has previously been defined as orientation, with an emphasis on compliance-related activities over the course of one-half day. Managers are provided guidance and tools for helping new staff members become productive employees, including a checklist to ensure their workspace is functional. Human Resources also provides guidance for new employees on what to do on day one, by day 30, and within one's first year on the job.

Table 5

University Guidance for Onboarding New Employees

Timing	HR Objectives and/or Task Lists for New Hires
Before Arrival: Goals	• Completing Form I-9 Section 1 • Setting up your direct deposit • Filling out your tax forms (W4 and G4) • Acknowledging several policies and procedures • Setting up your network ID and password • Enrolling in Duo Two Factor Authentication (for security purposes) • Reviewing information about transportation and parking • Uploading a photo for your University ID • Registering for the New Employee Welcome Session
Welcome Session: HR Objectives	• Provide an overview of the university's mission and culture • Explain the many benefits and programs that are available to you • Ensure that your paperwork is processed correctly • Give you the opportunity to get your ID card and parking tag
Day One: Task List	• Complete your Form I-9 • Attend your Department Orientation • Register to Attend New Employee Welcome Session • Meet with your Manager • Set up your Personal Workspace • Get your Parking Tag and ID card
By Day 30: Task List	• Enroll in your Benefits • Start your Retirement Savings • Sign up for Healthy Connect Mobile App • Get Required Training • Performance Management (staff only) • Take the Campus Walking Tour • Learn all that you can about the university!
Within One’s First Year: Task List	• Be Engaged • Meet Regularly with your Manager • Take Advantage of Learning Opportunities • Get Your Performance Review • Start your Retirement Savings • Stay Healthy • Continue to Explore the University

Participants, Sampling, and Recruitment

The participant group for this study was selected due to the particularly high turnover rates in the Campus Life unit of the university, as well as the student-facing nature of their roles. In some cases, it was noted, the university retained students longer than it retained some of the critical Campus Life staff, which could potentially put student success programs at risk. The participants who were interviewed for this study included the student-facing professionals of the Student Involvement, Leadership, and Transitions (SILT) team, Residence Life team, and Civic and Community (CCE) team within the university's division of Campus Life. The mission of SILT is to cultivate purpose in students through transformative experiences that promote engagement, learning, intercultural competency, and community building. Departments like SILT exist within many modern universities and are critical to institutional missions because of their important roles in aiding with student engagement, retention, and graduation rates (Braxton et al., 2007). Among the many critical operational activities led by SILT staff members are student orientations, advising of student affinity groups that foster social integration, and executing student leadership programs designed to foster institutional integrity through involvement with university priorities.

Residence Life is a common team among universities that house students on campus. The mission of the team is to create a supportive environment that promotes student development through an intentional residential learning experience. Because of the high-touch nature of Residence Life work, these staff members are critical to student engagement and development.

The university's Center for Civic and Community Engagement (CCE) supports members of the student and broader university community to develop and apply their skills to foster a kinder and more socially just world. The team delivers programs that help students channel their passion for social justice, education, health care, and more into purposeful impact in the local community and beyond.

In addition to those student-facing staff members, the study engaged with department leaders to examine multiple perspectives including directors who are responsible for the hiring and onboarding of new team members. Outside of the Campus Life team, the study engaged key individuals from the university's central HR function who oversee university-level employee onboarding. Finally, meetings were held with one cabinet-level university executive to better understand the strategic aspect of the Resource Based View (RBV) theory and inform the study on the university's alignment with viewing talent management of non-faculty professional staff as a potential competitive advantage.

Table 6

Study Participant Characteristics

Role and Level	University Affiliation	Pseudonym
Program Coordinator	Campus Life, SILT	Mia
Program Coordinator	Campus Life, SILT	Kennedy
Program Coordinator (former)	Campus Life, SILT	Ford
Associate Director	Campus Life, SILT	Sam
Associate Director of Operations	Campus Life, Res Life	Nehah
Complex Director	Campus Life, Res Life	Lachlan
Complex Director	Campus Life, Res Life	Niky
Program Coordinator	Campus Life, CCE	Audra
Program Coordinator	Campus Life, CCE	Layla
Senior Program Coordinator	Campus Life, CCE	Mylo
Supervisory Senior Manager	Campus Life	Linda
Human Resources Leader	Central University	Rodney
Cabinet-Level University Leader (SVP)	Central University	Augustus

This combination of participants meets the standard of appropriateness as described by Bowen (2008) due to their representation of individuals who represent and have knowledge of the topic of onboarding newly hired staff employees. This representation of the topic comes in the form of experience for the student-facing staff members. The knowledge of the topic comes in the form of leading new staff members through onboarding experiences for the managers and leaders involved.

The within-case sampling plan for the Campus Life team members, HR and campus leadership identified these 12 individuals and key roles and acknowledges the boundaries and frame described by Miles et al. (2020) as important considerations for a study of this type. The sampling plan defined and was bounded by aspects of the case that can be studied within the limits of time and budget, and that connect to the defined research questions. The frame of this study required an examination of the concept and process of onboarding new non-faculty professional staff employees with a university. Both boundaries and frame were considered in the approach.

This study was purposeful and theory driven as defined by Miles et al. (2020), based primarily on the Resource Based View theory, with additional theoretical context provided by Human Capital Theory and Human Resource Development Theory. The site was chosen according to this relevant theory because of the critical nature of the non-faculty staff roles within the Campus Life division, as well as the likelihood of those staff members being able to recall and reflect on the university's onboarding practices. This enabled a better understanding of the applicability of the RBV theory in a higher education setting by examining the organizational view of these staff members as valued resources. Specifically, if we know from the literature and from practice that critical student-facing roles are important for student success, then we know that they are valuable, rare, and difficult to imitate, according to the VRIO framework of the RBV theory (Rothaermel, 2013; Wolniak, Flores, et al., 2016). This theory driven study allowed us to examine the question of whether the university is "organized" to leverage those characteristics into a sustainable competitive advantage by investing in efforts such as strategic talent management, including best-practice employee onboarding spanning compliance, clarification, culture and connection (Bauer, 2010).

The process of constant comparison was used to determine if the sample size of the 12 Campus Life, HR, and senior leader subjects are sufficient to achieve data saturation (Bowen, 2008). Each stage of the constant comparison process was completed through the execution of the study, including comparing incidents applicable to each emergent theme from the data, integrating those themes and their properties, delineating the theory, and summarizing how the theory applied (Bowen, 2008). The result was as expected – a degree of data replication or redundancy in the interview responses, even among the individuals in different roles, since university onboarding is a shared experience and easily recalled by new employees and leaders who hire new employees regularly.

Recruiting participants was done directly, after consultations with senior leadership from the university and Campus Life. I reached out to individuals with direct interview requests via email after receiving permission from appropriate levels of leadership, including thick descriptions of the significance of the problem, purpose of the study, and interview guide. I also encouraged participants to participate by working with hiring managers and other leaders on indirect recruitment efforts.

Method 1 – Semi-Structured Interviews

The primary method of data collection for this study was semi-structured interviews, which is the most commonly used type of interview in qualitative studies (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). This method was appropriate because of the mutual interest in, and familiarity with, the theme at the center of the study. Their familiarity with the topic allowed the participants to have a perspective that was shared on their own terms, which was the goal in this case. The semi-structured interview best practices included an interview guide with topics and questions asked in a specific sequence, that was, in some cases, shared beforehand with participants and other university stakeholders who assisted with access (Marshall & Rossman, 2016). Sharing the interview guide increased trust, which is key to an effective interviewer-interviewee relationship (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Before developing the interview guide for this study (see Appendix), an initial question was considered on whether interviews should be included in the research design. Based on the research questions and the objective of the study, which is to understand individual perspective views and feelings about the phenomenon of the university's new employee onboarding process, interviews are appropriate research tools in this case (Rallis & Rossman, 2012).

The interview guide for this study was developed based on faculty guidance, textbook instruction, and other resources from the literature on data collection methods for qualitative case studies. Prior to beginning field work, considerable thought went into the literature review, constructing a theoretical framework, identifying the research problem, developing the research questions, and selecting sample, which is the process and sequence for qualitative case studies advised by Merriam (1988). Interviews as a research tool also aligned with the constructivist epistemology of this study, as supported in the statement by Marshall & Rossman (2016), "Qualitative researchers rely quite extensively on in-depth interviewing. Kvale (1996) describes qualitative interviews as 'a construction of knowledge' (p. 2), where two (or more) individuals discuss a 'theme of mutual interest' (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 2)" (p. 147).

Interview questions were created based on the broad areas of knowledge that are relevant to answering the research questions. Questions were developed within each major area for student-facing team members, and for HR and university leaders. The goals for each grouping of questions were to generate responses that were expansive and descriptive, and to help set priorities for data collection (Miles et al., 2020). Effort was made to maintain as much uniformity to the interview guide as possible when different stakeholders are interviewed. However, additional questions were occasionally necessary when meeting with managers and Human Resource leaders who are further removed from their own onboarding experiences than the Campus Life team. Leaders were able to add perspective on how the university values employees and how talent management efforts are viewed.

Interview Process

As stated in the interview guide, and out of respect for the time of participants, interviews lasted no longer than one hour. The target time for the structured portion of the interviews was 30 – 45 minutes to allow for informal conversation, follow up questions, and participant elaborations.

Interviews took place via Zoom, which aided the process in a number of ways. Zoom maximized ease of scheduling across multiple sites within the university, as well as when participants were working remotely which is a common practice for many university employees at least once per week since returning to full on-campus operations after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. Zoom is a familiar and accessible tool commonly used across the university; therefore it added an aspect of comfort to an otherwise unnatural interaction of a semi-formal interview. Finally, Zoom recordings were easily accessed and reviewed during the analysis phase of the study, assisting with accuracy and reliability.

A mock interview conducted on November 30, 2022, resulted in the process for recording the interviews that will be followed for this study. The process combined the Zoom virtual audio and visual format with an additional audio recording using the Otter.ai software program. For this study, once participant consent for recording was confirmed, the text transcripts, audio and video of each interview was recorded to the Cloud via Zoom on my laptop computer.

Before the cleaning and transcribing of each interview as part of the data analysis phase of the study, I took time to create an analytical memo reflecting on the interview and ideas that were generated that relate to the research questions and purpose of the study. Creating memos as soon as the first field data are collected, and throughout the study, assisted with organizing data into codes, enabling the recognition of repeating themes and ultimately data saturation (Miles et al., 2020). Analytical memos were generated and stored on the same laptop and in the same cloud-based folders as each interview, assisting with organizing and retrieving the data.

Method 2 – Document Analysis

To a lesser extent than the semi-structured interviews, document analysis was used as a method of data collection for this study and triangulation during the analysis phase. As suggested by Marshall & Rossman (2016), content analysis of PowerPoint presentations and other documents was be used to supplement participant interviews and gain a more complete understanding of the practices being studied. Triangulation of data through the addition of document analysis was useful to further describe, and perhaps explain some of the phenomenon of the onboarding process through the narrative of the university (Rallis & Rossman, 2012).

Leadership from university Human Resources shared two types of documents as inputs to this research. Onboarding documents related to the universities New Employee Welcome Session (NEWS) and the Talent Management Strategy presentation were useful in this study due to their relevance to the research questions and purpose of the study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Data Analysis

Given the constructivist nature of this study, knowledge was constructed through a systematic reasoning process that began in the early conceptual stage (Rallis & Rossman, 2012). After the collection of the data from interviews and documents, analytic procedures included the phases of organizing the data, becoming immersed in the data, coding the data, generating summaries and themes, and developing interpretations through analytic memos, exploring alternatives, and presenting the findings in writing and orally (Marshall & Rossman, 2016).

Specifically, data were transcribed using the transcription feature of Zoom while reviewing the recorded interview videos. Microsoft Office software was used to sort and code data. Microsoft Word files and Excel spreadsheets were used to compile and organize data from each interview transcript. Each text file from the Zoom interview transcription was converted into a Microsoft Word file and then cleaned for clarity to improve readability and prepare the transcript for analysis. After reading each transcript in full, a code list was built by first identifying frequently used keywords and phrases using the "find" feature. For example, a code was created for the word "benefits" because of the prevalence of mentions among participants. Additional inductive codes were created as the coding process proceeded. After compiling mentions of the code across interview transcripts, common patterns emerged and evolved into larger themes. For example, the code "benefits" led to the larger theme of employees limiting their association with HR and onboarding to the establishment of employee benefits. Following this process for code and theme development, quotes from each interview subject were compiled and categorized according to their relationship to each of the Four Cs from Bauer (2010). Similarly, meeting notes were input into Microsoft Word, read in full, and organized by their relationship with the Resource Based View theory, tracking references to the view of the staff as rare, valuable, and inimitable.

The second step for analyzing the interview data was creating a worksheet in Microsoft Excel, with individual tabs for each interview subject. Within each tab, columns were created to match the codes that emerged from the transcript reviews. I then populated cells within each column with quotes related to the initial codes, allowing for an overview of data excerpts related to emergent themes. Using the same structure for each tab within the worksheet provided an organized method for comparing data across interview subjects. This approach also assisted with retrieving quotes across multiple interview subjects for each theme and sub-theme as they emerged.

Trustworthiness

To enhance the trustworthiness of this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016), procedures established as good practice by qualitative research experts were followed. While semi-structured interviews do not meet the standard for prolonged engagement, which is to be in a setting for a long period of time (Miles et al., 2020), having a long history as an insider within the university's community was helpful with establishing credibility and validity (Chavez-Reyes, 2008). Following interviews, member checks were used to share data and interpretations with participants to enhance the dependability of the data. Specifically, a brief summary of key takeaways from each interview was provided to participants in follow-up emails, inviting their feedback. All interview takeaways were deemed to have been interpreted accurately.

Peer debriefing is another tool that was employed to increase trustworthiness. In addition to the critical engagement of the dissertation committee, external peers from other universities who are familiar with the concepts framing the significance of this study indicated an interest in the topic and engaged in peer debriefings. Without divulging specifics, this study was discussed among administrators attending summer conferences including the Graduate Management Admissions Council and the Graduate Business Curriculum Roundtable meetings. There was strong agreement with the significance of the study, as well as the application of the Resource Based View theory as a unique lens for viewing implications and recommendations. Further, triangulation of methods as a means to achieve greater trustworthiness was achieved through the collection and analysis of interview notes and document analysis in this study (Marshall & Rossman, 2016; Miles et al., 2020).

Positionality Statement

My previous career spanned 20 years in the private sector, with most of that time in positions of management and leadership. Through formal training and experience, the value of talent (people) was emphasized. The concept of talent management was taught and practiced with diligence and discipline because of the cost of attrition, and because of the value of employee continuity to the business. After transitioning into higher education in 2011, I witnessed a rate of voluntary turnover that was surprisingly high. I was also surprised by the apparent acceptance of this as a norm in higher education. An examination of this positionality reveals an “external-insider” orientation, according to research on insider positionality (Chavez-Reyes, 2008). As someone not native to the higher-education culture due to my first career in a different field, I have the advantage of detachment from the setting and bring an external positionality because of my previous career. I have a long-formed point of view on how talent should be managed and how staff continuity can serve as a competitive advantage for an organization. I had to exercise care when reflecting on my previous experiences, and biases towards talent management practices. At the same time, I have established strong relationships and a reputation as a leader in the 12 years since joining the university community. With this came an insider positionality, along with its benefits and challenges. Benefits included expediency of rapport building and immediate legitimacy in the field. Challenges included selective reporting and bias in selecting participants (Chavez-Reyes, 2008).

Without sustained reflection, my findings might also have been affected if I allowed my biases to influence follow up questions or other aspects of the interactions with participants. Findings might also have been affected if I allowed my biases to impact the interpretation of results from interviews and/or other interactions.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

This dissertation was designed to investigate how non-faculty professional staff members at one higher education institution perceived their onboarding experiences when they were newly hired by the university. In the context of overall talent management activities, onboarding is an essential and early opportunity for institutions to build organizational commitment and develop valued talent over time. When considered collectively, the data analyzed in this case study suggest that student-facing Campus Life staff members reflect upon their onboarding experiences as critical to their perception of the institution, their understanding of their role, and their initial feelings of fit and belonging within the university culture. However, the experiences with onboarding were inconsistent across individuals, leading to differing levels of organizational commitment and overall job satisfaction among study participants. Some experiences were reflected upon positively, with interview subjects making direct connections between onboarding experiences and their organizational commitment. Other experiences were reflected upon with criticism and disappointment, revealing weaker connections to the university that could result in additional staff turnover. While those inconsistencies were apparent, a consistent theme throughout the data collection was the tremendous pride taken by these professionals as members of a university community and caretakers of the undergraduate student experience. This should provide some optimism for university leaders, as it suggests that student-facing professional staff employees value the most important aspect of their work, which is helping students persist and succeed in college.

The findings from this research study of an exemplar case suggest there is value in increasing efforts to include onboarding best practices in institutional planning efforts around talent management. Further, the findings suggest that if an institution organizes its efforts to prioritize best practice onboarding as a tool to mitigate high turnover of student-facing staff – a valuable, rare, and inimitable resource – the staff itself could be developed into a sustainable competitive advantage for the institution in an increasingly competitive higher education environment.

Over the course of my interviews with ten professionals across three teams within the Campus Life organization at a mid-sized private university in the southern United States, themes emerged that were mapped to the Four C's onboarding best practices underpinning much of this study – Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection (Bauer, 2010; *Understanding Employee Onboarding*, 2021). Compliance is the most fundamental level of onboarding and includes teaching employees legal and policy-related rules and regulations. When considered on its own, Compliance resembles what is typically considered orientation, which differs significantly from onboarding (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Only when Compliance activities are combined with the other best practice onboarding activities of Clarification, Culture, and Connection, do the benefits of onboarding become apparent (Hirsch, 2017; Meyer & Bartels, 2017; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Clarification refers to ensuring that employees understand their new jobs and all related expectations. Culture is a broad category that includes providing employees with a sense of institutional norms – both formal and informal. Connection refers to the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish to be successful in their roles and career. For the purpose of organizing how the findings of this study are reported, each best practice is exemplified by one quote describing the main themes that emerged from the interviews and expanded upon in sub-themes to provide appropriate support, context, and detail from the data.

Table 7

Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes from Study Findings

Best Practices from Bauer (2010)	Themes from Interview Data	Sub-Themes from Interview Data
Compliance	“Met with HR and did all the benefits stuff."	1. Four Hours at the HR Building 2. All About the Benefits, Baby 3. In-Person, Virtual, or Virtually Nothing
Clarification	“A lot of it was figuring things out as we went."	1. Role Ambiguity is a Red Flag 2. Supervisors Can Be Essential to Role Clarity 3. Role Clarity Connects to Personal Passion
Culture	“The values emphasized during onboarding align with my personal beliefs.”	1. Missions Matter 2. What’s Good for the Students is Good for the Staff 3. Culture is More than Mission
Connection	“Beginning to bridge those gaps and relationships early.”	1. Supervisors to the Rescue (again) 2. Confidence in the Work and Belonging 3. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

Theme 1: “Met with HR and Did All the Benefits Stuff”

While scholars have been diligent in describing the differences between onboarding and orientation, one notable similarity is the inclusion of the organization’s important policies and procedures as an early point of emphasis (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). In some cases, onboarding is a process that can last several months, whereas orientation is a specific event that typically lasts one day or less. Nearly all study participants experienced their first day or early days at the university participating in what scholars would describe as orientation, rather than onboarding, which was focused on aspects of compliance. For example, Lachlan, who moved from a different state to work at the university stated, “My very first day of work, we spent four hours at the HR building. We had a whole HR presentation. They went over benefits, vacation, all types of things related to HR in your position." This recounting from Lachlan, who went on to describe his onboarding experience as “great,” speaks volumes in just a few sentences. The notion that spending four hours with HR is what Lachlan associated with onboarding is a sub-theme that recurs with other participants. And the idea of it being a ’whole HR presentation’ turned out to be more than simple semantics. When that half-day was over, Lachlan and others who participated in similar days believed they had all they needed to begin their new careers. Recalling her first day on the job, Niki shared that she felt ready after one HR discussion. She told me, “I just remember that meeting with HR, where she really helped me understand what it meant to work at this university and all that stuff”.

The emphasis on benefits and vacation is also indicative of what many participants experienced. This second sub-theme is important for a reason that surfaced after several participants mentioned this being their first job and their first time having to think about benefits for themselves.

The third sub-theme that emerged from participant comments related to the time spent with HR is that Lachlan’s experience was facilitated in person – mentioning, “They went over benefits, vacation, etc.,” while others had experiences ranging from virtual to completely self-directed sessions.

Sub-Theme 1: Four Hours at the HR Building

Fortunately for Lachlan, his great experience with HR occurred on his very first day of work. This is the exception, not the rule. Internal documents from the university acknowledge that the formal HR welcome of new employees does not need to occur on the first day of employment. Employees should register for the welcome session on their first day, but the welcome sessions are facilitated monthly and new employee start dates are not as predictable. Due to the busy nature of the beginning of each academic year, the university hosts two welcome sessions each August. This is especially important for Campus Life employees who need to be prepared to welcome new and returning students to campus in the fall semester. University documents identify other first-day expected tasks as completing the I-9 form which initiates eligibility for benefits enrollment, meeting with one's manager, setting up a workspace, securing a university ID card, and registering for parking.

Like Lachlan, Layla relocated for the opportunity to work at the university. Unlike Lachlan, however, her new employee welcome session took nine months to come to fruition. She recalled, "I did not have a new employee orientation until this past spring semester. It just didn't feel worth my time necessarily." Layla described financial constraints as a reason she needed to start working as soon as possible, so while she prepared to relocate, she started work remotely, stating:

> I needed my first paycheck, and they were going to mail it which was going to take longer. I was on a time crunch trying to move. This is just the first interaction that I remember. So, I just recall my supervisor reaching out to them to see how they could help me get it and so like could I pick it up instead of getting it mailed just to help me in my moving process.

She went on to say, "That first interaction with my first day on the job was meeting with my supervisor and our graduate assistant via Zoom." Since Layla's start was so disconnected from her university onboarding, it seemed difficult for her to see it as more than a formality. She explained:

> I know that what’s mandated are the things around Title IX or having to do Federal work study training because if you’re going to hire Federal workshop students – I understand the mandated things have to be what they are, but I think there’s a lot of room for us to be transformative of what it looks like to train staff around the other topics.

While Layla seemed to view her in-person HR experience as transactional, her overall employee experience has been positive because of her team. She credits the team, rather than the institution for helping her feel welcomed into the community. She reflected on her experiences prior to her HR onboarding, "The team organized virtual coffee breaks and team-building activities, which really helped me bond with my colleagues. I appreciated the efforts they made to make me feel like a part of the team." Given her welcome from her team, and delay in meeting with HR, Layla, like other participants, perceived the value of HR onboarding to be limited to whatever was awaiting her at the HR building. She expected that to be mostly filling out forms, rather than an avenue to establishing any meaningful connection to the institution.

The perception that the onboarding role of HR is limited to compliance-related activities such as completing required forms and training modules is reinforced by the experiences of Kennedy, who recalled her first days on the job:

> Oh, I don't even know that I had any contact with HR beyond filling out forms so that I could get paid. Or even - I guess those more formal training modules that we had to complete and getting my corporate card set up, things like that. But in terms of actually meeting with an HR representative or someone from the university’s HR office, our only communication was like, ‘Here's my I-9 documentation so you can get my work

> authorization form,' and that was about it. Any kind of onboarding or training I received, outside of those online modules I had to complete, came either from my teammates or my supervisors.

Like Kennedy, when asked about her experiences with the onboarding process through the university, Audra limited her responses to compliance-related activities, including obtaining a university identification card and parking pass:

> I remember getting the card was pretty straightforward when we had to get it. I mean, the instructions were laid out pretty clearly. I do remember there being limited hours, so you just have to make sure you knew about when to go get it. I remember parking being a challenge. For me, I mean, yes, parking was definitely a big challenge, and I get it. Everyone wants to be closer to campus, but I sometimes will be here early in the mornings, 7:00 AM or late at night until 10:00 PM for student-facing programming. So, going back and forth between [locations] just wasn't feasible for me. I do remember there being a challenge getting my pass, if I'm not mistaken. So, there was, I think, a week where I was paying out of pocket, but then of course, my supervisor was like, 'No, you're not doing that.' I think there was a little lag there. And parking can add up. Ten dollars a day can.

It was apparent across study participants that their association with the idea of onboarding into their new roles was tied closely to, and limited to, their early formal interactions with HR especially if they had the experience of visiting the HR building.

Sub-Theme 2: All About the Benefits, Baby

Even with a limited view on the role and value of HR in the onboarding process, several participants mentioned setting up benefits as an important experience. An important insight was raised from these responses. As illustrated in the recalled experience from Lachlan, many of the study participants were just beginning their careers and had no experience with how health or vacation benefits work:

> I remember this is my first full-time job coming out of school. So, I remember calling my mom like, ‘Hey, going to work today.’ I remember that day very vividly. Off the top of my head, the thing that comes to mind I think is maybe vacation. I think learning about how we accrue vacation, and it increases after you've been here for some time.

The excitement around recalling this milestone experience was palpable when Niki, still in her first year with the university, explained her thoughts:

> I had multiple meetings with HR. The biggest thing I remember taking away from that was, of course, being just out of grad school, this is my first time having to understand benefits and retirement and picking my health plan. So, I really appreciated them walking me through all of that. She even was open about like, ‘This is the health plan that I have, and this is why I really like it, but here’s the advantages of both,’ and really went into depth on those things, that as somebody just coming out of grad school and dealing with this for the first time, like me, didn’t understand. So, I really appreciated that.

Niki elaborated:

> If you’re new [on our team], they’ll pair you up with someone who’s been around for a little while, and they’ll be your buddy. I think on the university level, something like that could also be beneficial, right? Just to say, ‘Hey, we’re all new professionals,’ especially, again, since we are in a field where a lot of the roles are entry-level roles. You’re straight out of grad school, and so you’re doing this for the first time. You’re learning your benefits. You’re learning lots of things for the first time. We’re entry-level employees,

> right? The university could say, ‘Hey, you’re in your early 20s and you don’t understand how benefits work,’ right? I think that sort of institutional support could definitely be beneficial for new professionals, and I feel like there’s a lot more when thinking about other areas of professional development. Thinking about – like I said, explaining, understanding benefits, and understanding even your place in the institution, those sorts of things would be helpful.

These are important processes for employees at any stage of their career, however for early-stage professionals the processes can also be anxiety-inducing. Audra recalled her own anxiety and offered insight into what could have improved the experience of setting up her benefits:

> I think it would be cool if there was almost like a welcome crew or something that did that. I think back to the university side, it took me a couple of weeks to really prioritize setting up my benefits and all that. So, I think for incoming professionals, it would be nice to have some more like just, ‘Hey, here's open office hours if you need to chat about setting up your benefits and all these things.’ Because then I think it's like you have a certain period before you have to do it, but you're still trying to figure out what you're doing and how you're doing it.

Audra was not alone in recalling a frustrating experience when setting up benefits for the first time. Nehah, who also joined the university directly from graduate school, expressed similar frustration and noted, “We’re just sometimes not good with the details of, this person needs this at this stage of their career." That comment from Nehah is exemplified by what another new staff member, Mia, experienced:

> I know prior to me starting, I received an email from someone in campus life HR, which had a couple of to-dos, like submit your ID card photo, and here is a - I think there was a

virtual seminar before I started with all new employees that was running through benefits, and I think that was two hours or a half day, but the only thing I found relevant was the conversation about benefits and how to select them because I was new to that part. But because it was - everyone from the university was central HR, it didn't feel personalized, or give me any indication of what I was walking into. Then once I got started, I don't think I ever heard from HR at all. I don't think I ever received a ‘Welcome to the university,’ or ‘This is who I am,’ and so slowly through the year, I've heard the names of HR folks, but I don't think I've had a one-on-one conversation with them.

The similarity in these sentiments highlight an area of opportunity for universities, particularly with junior professional staff. More personalized and hands-on introduction to the benefits process from HR could reduce the initial anxiety associated with starting one’s career and could position HR as a valued partner throughout the onboarding process, rather than the keepers of the forms and training modules.

Sub-Theme 3: In-Person, Virtual, or Virtually Nothing

If Lachlan’s fully in-person experience was on the “great” end of a spectrum, and Layla’s delayed, but still in-person experience was in the middle, then Kennedy’s initial onboarding experience exists at the not-great, or non-existent, end of that spectrum. In her role, Kennedy helps coordinate new student orientation programs for the university. She was hired in the month of July, and although the university holds two new employee welcome sessions in August due to the busy time of year, Kennedy was off and running by then, recalling:

So, preorientation [for new students] usually starts the middle of August and I had joined in the middle of July. So, everyone is in go-time, they are so busy. I remember I joined

> and from my first three or four days, I felt really bad because everyone was really, really busy but then my supervisor was doing his best not to just overwhelm me all at once.

For Kennedy, learning about the important compliance-related aspects of the job and the institution had to take a back seat to getting the work done at the busiest time of year. She recalls her initial onboarding experiences as afterthoughts that were in the way of getting to the real work:

> My manager was like, 'Just take it easy. Did you complete these trainings?' So, I know we had a series of HR trainings that we had to complete, and these were everything from vehicle safety to hazing in the office space to just all those standard trainings, I think, that all professionals probably take. After that, I was just sort of sitting around like, 'Give me a task to do. I want to get started.'

Kennedy continued:

> I just know that they were a series of videos that we had to watch and then take a quiz for, but that was about, I think, as much as I remember in terms of legal content. Oh, we had to do one about what kind of gifts you can receive. I forget the terminology for that. Again, it was during a time when I was also just inundated with so much other information, directly involving the [new student] preorientation, the work that I was doing, that I think it all kind of got lost in the masses of my memory right now.

She did not place the blame at the feet of the university, however, acknowledging:

> I think had I joined at a different time, it might not have been quite the extreme crash course that it was, but just given the time of year that I had started, it wasn't really like people had time in their day to sit down and hold my hand through everything. I mean, I made it through, and I do appreciate that I was able to learn so much in such a short

> amount of time. My supervisor did everything he could to answer my questions to make sure I was supported.

Kennedy was not the only study participant who was eager to get to work in their new job and does not recall the university's compliance training as impactful. Mia felt similarly, recalling:

> I remember doing Title IX, I remember doing driver certification, financial trainings related to reconciliations. A lot of those trainings, they were all videos to watch and then click for answers. Yes, that was all early on. Yes. I mean, I feel like some of these videos have not been re-recorded in a minute. So, there was a little bit of a 90s vibe to some of them. But yes, it was just sitting through hours of content and then clicking answers. I'm not sure that I retained as much as I needed to, but at that point, I was also up against the clock of my work is starting, and so it does not feel as relevant to sit through some of these things.

Whether due to busy times related to seasonality, which are predictable, or due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which took every institution by surprise, compliance activities that were conducted virtually were not viewed as impactful by study participants. Mylo, like others, was hesitant to place blame on the institution for delivering virtual onboarding activities. Mylo started with the university during the height of the pandemic. He was candid about what he felt was lacking in his HR onboarding experience due to the inability to connect in person:

> Well, it's difficult. I mean, I understand that that was virtual. I think. I don't know if it was. I don't think it was the first time they did virtual, but I don't think they were used to always doing the onboarding virtually. I think they weren't able to build a sense of community for that group or at least for me, but I do wish that there was a little bit of differentiation, knowing that I'm in campus life and that I'm in [a specific area]. It just

would have been nice to see that there were things specific for my role. A little bit more individualization.

The participants in this study are in the early stages of their careers in higher education. They understand the importance of compliance-related activities when they begin jobs that are student-facing and come with serious responsibilities. Generally, they associate their onboarding experiences with the little time they spent with university HR, and those experiences varied based on how personalized they felt, with in-person experiences being positive and virtual experiences being less impactful. In some cases, the content or type of virtual trainings were hardly remembered at all. An important insight is the potential for greater, more personalized emphasis on setting up benefits for new employees entering their first full-time job. The university has an opportunity to strengthen organizational commitment from new employees who feel personally guided through such an important, yet unfamiliar, process.

Theme 2: "A Lot of it Was Figuring Things Out as We Went"

Clarification – or role clarity, in the context of talent management and onboarding – refers to the clear understanding and definition of an employee's role, responsibilities, expectations, and objectives within an organization. Proper clarification ensures that employees have a comprehensive understanding of what is expected of them in their position, how their role contributes to the organization's goals, and how they should prioritize and execute their tasks. On the other hand, role ambiguity has been identified as a significant driver for employee dissatisfaction and turnover among higher education staff (Curran & Prottas, 2017). Roles can be clarified through job descriptions, organizational charts, performance feedback and through other tools commonly used by HR and managers in institutions. Sam, now a manager himself, recalled his journey to role clarification when he first began his entry-level role by stating, "A lot of it was figuring things out as we went." Sam was not alone in his experience of feeling like he did not have a roadmap for success when he began in the role. This first sub-theme of needing to be self-directed was reiterated by several study participants, including one who ultimately resigned due, in part, to frustration with the lack of clear direction they received in their role. A second sub-theme emerged when participants were asked how HR helped clarify their roles and many answered that role clarity came from their managers and teams. While it's not surprising that the details of one's role would be best described by those closest to the work, when asked about their roles in the context of the larger institution, participants still rarely mentioned HR clarifying this during their onboarding. The third sub-theme offers some optimism for university leaders. Participants in this study identified personally with their roles and described their commitment to their stakeholders, even if not specifically to the institution. Helping new staff employees see the connections between the meaning in their specific roles and university priorities during onboarding activities could inspire a closer connection between the employee and the institution.

Sub-Theme 1: Role Ambiguity is a Red Flag

Sam joined the university as an entry-level Program Coordinator directly from graduate school. He described his experiences positively, resulting in a promotion to a supervisory position that he enjoys. While speaking positively about his overall experiences, Sam noted that he has been able to thrive at the university despite not having clearly defined roles when he began his employment. He describes his first exposure to his role which was newly created just before he joined the university:

> We were also the first staff to have that position, and so there wasn't a transition doc book. There wasn't a manual on how to do the job. The job description itself was pretty vague and pretty open-ended, there was a lot of other duties as assigned listed. So, I don't

> think I had an idea, aside from the things that they mentioned in the interview. It's not like I came in with very set expectations because I knew there would be a lot of ambiguity as I navigated a new role. Both for myself but also noting it's a new role for the institution.

He continued:

> So, a lot of it was figuring things out as we went. You know, you hear the expression like, 'Building the plane while you're flying it.' I think we were doing a lot of that. A lot of the programs that I was tasked to create were a little bit more experimental than anything. It was a new area for us, and so a lot of it was - just as I didn't have that many expectations coming in, I don't know that there was a set expectation for me. So I think that also made things easier, but I think at the same time, it was it was challenging because I didn't have a playbook. I was kind of left to figure out how to navigate things as I went along.

When probed for descriptors that characterize the role clarification aspect of his onboarding experience, Sam chose the words "decentralized" and "unorganized" to paint his picture:

> There's just a lot of different systems. So, how to go to a lot of different places to access those systems. There's a lot of different logins, right? There's a lot of different portals. So I would say it was a little decentralized. I would say I felt pretty independent in the process. It never felt like there was someone ensuring I was checking the boxes off. So, in many ways it kind of felt like it was up to me to take care of things. My supervisor helped me set a timeline, but it felt internal.

In elaborating on how things felt unorganized, Sam defended the institution by reiterating the newly created role, but also pointed out some institutional behaviors that could be improved:

> I’m going to say unorganized, but I do want to explain. I think it was because it was a new position, and I think we do this a lot in Student Affairs. We create a role because we identify a need. But, we’re quick to sometimes create a position, especially when we get the salary line approval, that we don’t necessarily think about what the goals for this position are for the next three to five years. So, I didn’t have that organization for myself. I didn’t have a map to follow, and I had to kind of define that myself, but I was also a new professional, right? So, I had the tools that I was equipped with through grad school, and I had that passion and that energy fresh out of grad school, but because I didn’t have a map, at times, it may have felt a little unorganized. It may have felt like it was me or no one to define what was next. With the support of a supervisor, of course, but I had so much autonomy and there was so much ambiguity that I think it translated at times as being unorganized.

Sam was not the only study participant who came into a newly created role with little direction. Niki described a similar experience as a new Program Coordinator, approaching the role with a do-it-yourself attitude, and receiving support from her supervisor:

> I was able to spend a lot of time going through our OneDrive and seeing previous documents that were created by previous people. My position didn't exist before me either, so this is a completely brand-new role. So, I couldn't see what the person before me had done, but I could see what [student] orientation before me looked like and then from there, I had to start creating my own timeline in terms of day-to-day but doing that with my supervisor.

Niky and Sam were frustrated by the lack of role clarity, which they had to develop on their own rather quickly. For Kennedy, working through role ambiguity required a lengthy learning process. She explains when she felt she had established clarity in her role:

> I have to say it was probably even about six months in. Just because our office also had a lot of shifting and movement and whatnot and we've been given a lot of new initiatives in our programs. As soon as we finished pre-orientation, we basically received directives to grow and increase the capacity and the size for the following year, and because the preorientation program is so new, a lot of it was stuff that we had to create from the ground up. So, I felt that the scope of my position was continuing to evolve as the program itself was evolving, if that makes sense. So, now that I've completed a full year, I'm aware of what my responsibilities are and what I've been tasked to do. I'm not necessarily sure if that is standard for what another program coordinator in a different office might be experiencing, but for me, I feel like I have a pretty good grasp of what I can do, what I'm responsible for and what I should delegate, or what I can fall back on my supervisor for.

Patience seems to be paying off for Kennedy, as she seems excited about heading into her second year with greater clarity.

Gaining clarity for Audra was also a matter of patience, even as she was shown an organizational chart early in her university journey. Audra felt comfortable in understanding her role, but unsure of how it fit into the bigger picture of university priorities. She recalls:

> One thing that was confusing was the org chart. I didn't really understand where we fit in. I knew about my role. I could talk to you up and down about my job description based on the interview process and all the research I had done. Even my team and understanding

> that it is a part of campus life in the student center, but I didn't quite understand the org chart and the structure and how we're all connected, how we're all - these campus life priorities, the university priorities, that wasn't really broken down to me in terms of wanting to make it a priority. So, I think that would have been really helpful because from day one, it would have made me kind of have these buckets in my head of everything I'm doing. That didn't happen until a little bit longer in the game.

Fortunately for the university, these frustrations have not resulted in the resignations of most study participants. However, one study participant, Ford, was interviewed after his resignation from the university and his frustration from role ambiguity was apparent as a stressor and one important factor for their departure after less than one year in the role. Ford, who still harbors lingering frustrations, explains in hindsight:

> I think it would have been extremely helpful to have maybe my supervisor sit down with me, not necessarily every day, but maybe a couple of times a week just to say like, 'Hey, let's go over some stuff, expectations I have for you in this role. Let's talk about some of your ideas, some of your goals.' Just really giving me space to kind of talk things through out loud and bounce ideas off of each other. Because again, I'd like to ask questions, so I'm going to ask things like, 'What did the previous person do and how many students attended this type of event. Is this a good day to host events. What's the budget?' Like those types of things. I think maybe just having a frequent, maybe every other day or two-times-a-week check-in with a supervisor and then we move to a weekly one-on-one format but having that opportunity to say 'Hey, we're going to sit down, we're going to talk through some things. I know you're new. This is what we're going to talk through. We're going to review the budget. We're going to talk about the event calendar

> and trainings. I wanted to set you up to meet with this person and meet with this person because you're going to collaborate with them.’ Those types of opportunities, I think, would have been extremely helpful for me.

When Ford proactively sought clarification to mitigate the ambiguity surrounding his role and what was expected of him, he was frustrated by the vague, inadequate responses he received:

> I would share some of my frustrations, for lack of a better word, about the onboarding experience and what I perceived the culture as, and they were just kind of sharing with me that ‘Well, that's a university thing,’ or ‘Yes, you’re going to figure it out on your own. That's the same thing I had to do,’ or ‘The university doesn't focus on those types of things.’ Then, outside of other things that I was not used to because I had worked a public institution, it was like the culture of this private university was, ‘Oh, yes, this university has money when it came to me having a corporate card.’ I'd be like, ‘How much did you all spend on this event?’ And they’d be like, ‘That's not a thing. This university doesn't really care.’ I’d be like, ‘Wow.’ I guess that’s good when it comes to programming, not necessarily being as restricted by a budget. But the culture – it was just different. I was told a lot it was always just ‘different’ here; you have to get used to it and this university does their own thing, as opposed to ‘Well, this is how it’s done within the university system or something like that.’ It's just like, ‘This place is just different as far as the money, as far as the culture, the types of people that work here.’ Again, I just was told multiple times like, ‘Yes, you're not going to have an onboarding experience because they just don't do that.’

The unfortunate result for the university is that Ford felt as if he had no other option but to resign after only a short time as a staff member. This result aligns with existing literature that places a heavy emphasis on the importance of addressing role ambiguity in efforts to improve higher education staff satisfaction and retention (Curran & Prottas, 2017). And it could be indicative of an underlying factor driving the record high turnover among university staff members recently.

Critics might argue that Ford bears some responsibility for this disconnect and ambiguity. While that may be true to some extent, the data suggest that the institution has the balance of power in its relationship with new employees. Ford, like most of the study participants, is young and inexperienced when it comes to advocating for himself within a new professional environment. It is reasonable to forgive Ford for not knowing what or who to ask, and to not feel safe in expressing confusion or frustration with the job. HR professionals have more experience with new employee dynamics than new employees do. Responsibility might be shared, but the expectation should not be that it is shared equally.

Sub-Theme 2: Supervisors Can Be Essential to Role Clarity

Providing a deep understanding of one’s role and the nuances therein is should not only be the responsibility of HR. It is unrealistic for a centralized HR department, such as the one at the university featured in this case study, to personalize onboarding for each staff employee to an extent that clearly defines one’s day-to-day responsibilities and expectations. This is one reason why managers, most often referred to by study participants as supervisors, are so critical to the staff employee’s journey. Supervisors play a key role in ensuring role clarity for their team members. They achieve this by employing various strategies that foster a clear understanding of responsibilities and expectations. Effective communication is at the heart of this process. As Ford noted in his previous response, regular one-on-one meetings have the potential to provide a platform for open discussions about roles and responsibilities, addressing any questions or concerns. His dissatisfaction was not merely due to the lack of role clarity, but also due to the lack of effort from his supervisor to establish that role clarity. Conversely, when asked about what the university is doing to keep her satisfied and committed in her role, Layla was clear in her response, “I would say, honestly, there is really nothing. It’s my office and my supervisors that keep me here.”

Because it should be a component of onboarding, establishing role clarity should start early, and the role of the supervisor in that process should start early as well. Audra provides a good example from her experience when contrasting her HR experience establishing role clarity with that of her supervisor:

> From a supervisor perspective, it was very, very thorough. That really helped me. My first day was really mapped out and it was very action-oriented which I like. I really appreciated that – the nuts and bolts. Yes, having that agenda of ‘Okay, this is what you need to do, this is your task list, this is what you need to accomplish.’

Lachlan also credits his early role clarity to his supervisor, recalling, “I understood my role through my manager and my intra-department supervisors, the director, and other colleagues that have been here before me, who had to learn on the fly about what's expected of us and our team.” He elaborated:

> HR did not do any follow ups or check-ins after that first initial first day of work when I was at the HR building for that four-hour session we had. So, I never heard any follow ups from them. Now, it's possible they could have sent some type of survey. Maybe I could have missed it. So, I'll give them a little bit of pass. But my manager directly, consistently for the first semester of fall 2019 consistently focused our one-on-ones around ‘How are you doing? How are you adjusting? What else can I do to support you? What else do you need?’ And then, slowly, those things build to, ‘Okay, now you've been

> here for a while, What else do you want to achieve? What else are you looking for to succeed?'

Similarly, Sam contrasted his early HR onboarding experiences with his early experiences with his supervisor:

> I don't think that there was a lot of structure with my HR onboarding either. My supervisor was the one who took me to get my parking pass and kind of told me what I would need to check off in terms of some of the more logistical pieces. I think that was key for me. Especially because I didn't have all of the other structure that I might have expected.

And since Sam has enjoyed a relatively long tenure on the staff compared to other study participants, his perspective extended from onboarding to other areas of talent management including his professional development, where he again credited only his supervisor:

> There is a midyear review and an annual review that I remember completing my first year. While I think those are more or less created or facilitated by HR, I only ever had conversations with my supervisor. I honestly don't think I've ever had any conversations with anyone from HR in terms of my development. It's always kind of been through my supervisor.

Sam continued, raising important questions worth considering:

> My supervisor was the key player in me feeling that I had what I needed as I started this role. But I often wondered like what does it mean for someone who doesn't have my supervisor? If I didn't have that great experience and then I ended up in this role to onboard three new people, would I have done the things I did? I don't think this is a problem unique to this university, but there is something to be said about how

> decentralized we are – it’s problematic, right? You can’t be dependent upon a supervisor and their time, capacity, understanding knowledge, experience, to create a very specific onboarding experience that’s going to set someone up for success. If they haven’t been given a set tool book from the university or the system, then everyone’s going to have a different experience.

During her time on the staff, Mia has experienced some frustration around role clarity but credits her supervisor with eventually getting her to a place of comfort and confidence in her role:

> It took a minute to learn and there were definitely days where I felt like I wasn't doing enough, especially because I went from going full-speed to the department’s take-a-break period. So, because we have a lot of officewide responsibilities when it comes to student engagement, we kind of have this all-hands-on-deck approach when it comes to student organizations and how we support them. So, I was learning more of those officewide responsibilities once we slowed down. I definitely would go to my supervisor a lot and use our one-on-one time to ask what I'm doing, to solicit feedback if it's going well and what else I could be working on. So, it kind of started off as our one-on-ones at that point were a lot more like to-do lists. I'm someone who wants that, just to make sure that I'm on the right path.

It may seem logical that supervisors should play an important role in establishing role clarity for new staff. However, the disconnect from these activities and those associated with university onboarding is concerning, and a risk to institutions due to the influence of role clarity on employee turnover (Curran & Prottas, 2017). If the institution does not have an emphasis on some level of role clarity during onboarding, and the supervisor does not effectively compensate for this shortly thereafter, the risk to staff retention is increased. There appears to be an opportunity for the university to connect initial onboarding activities more intently with the supervisors of those being onboarded, and to include some level of information that begins to clarify roles and responsibilities at the level of one's direct team. Finally, for this sub-theme, it is important for new staff employees to see their roles represented in university organizational charts to help establish the connection between the individual and the priorities and leadership of the institution.

Sub-Theme 3: Role Clarity Connects to Personal Passion

Universities serve an important social purpose by delivering higher education to and improving the lives of so many individuals. Participants in this study were selected, in part, because of their student-facing roles and the impact of their programs on the engagement, retention, and success of the students they serve. The importance of role clarity for this segment of professional staff is substantial because of the potential to connect the day-to-day activities and responsibilities to this higher social purpose. Study participants who spoke about their connections to the students and communities they serve also tended to speak about the institution more favorably, at times mentioning their personal passion and commitment to student success. Conversely, study participants who were considering leaving the university in the next year or so were less likely to discuss the concept of role clarity in the context of personal passion or university mission alignment. In one example of the power of this dynamic, Niki described a moment during her first year at the university when she considered leaving. She explained, "I was really frustrated and contemplating leaving, but I realized this is where my skills and passion align." An important insight for university leaders from Niki's experience is that the factors for dissatisfaction are not always limited to internal factors. External factors play a role, as well. However, the internal dynamics, if experienced positively, can be powerful enough to retain someone if they are considering leaving. Niki elaborated when asked what the root cause of her dissatisfaction was that had her contemplating leaving:

> I think a lot of it was frustration, I think, with the job in general. Like I said, I didn't want to do [this role], and it was - it's a very taxing role and a very taxing kind of situation, I think. Especially in August, when the students are coming back, and I'm doing all of these things, but I think kind of big picture, there was nothing that the university did, I guess, that had me contemplating. I think, truthfully, it was more outside factors. I'm sure this is probably potentially the inspiration for your research, this whole great resignation thing, right? I joined a Facebook group where people were just constantly complaining and constantly quitting. Because they're constantly, 'Oh, you know, they don't pay us enough.' And 'You know, this is really frustrating,' and 'That's really frustrating.' I think that's where I had to do a lot of reflecting of, 'Is this a normal amount of frustrating,' because all jobs are going to have those frustrating moments. Or is this something that I actually feel like is something that I truly would want to leave behind? So, that's kind of what it came down to, but I don't think there was anything like, 'Oh, this university is not the place,' or the thing that's really making me want to leave or consider leaving the field.

The frustration that had Niki contemplating leaving, and her subsequent decision to remain with the university because of a deeper understanding of the impact of her work is a dynamic worth understanding. Clarifying how one's role can be connected to their values and passion is an approach that universities could deploy with more intention during the onboarding period to reduce the risk of attrition of employees who experience moments of frustration. Mylo described a similar experience when asked about his organizational commitment and what keeps him from leaving the institution:

> I get this question asked a lot because I'm always on some interview panel. Really, it's my ability to grow and witness the impact of my work firsthand since I am in campus life. Our mission is to support students and I can see the effects of how my programming enhances the student experience. I hone in on that because my first year was horrible. Absolutely horrible. It was virtual. I was new. I didn't have the connections. There isn't anything institutionalized that ensures that I had the connection to the students. So, I was struggling with just saying, 'How do I get students interested when I have no connection to them?' And then last this past year, I found ways to connect, and it has transformed my view of this. I was ready to leave. My first year I was done. Definitely was out the door, and me staying allowed me to see how I can grow systems here. I have the freedom to innovate here and I'm seeing when things are properly nurtured, how successful our programs can be.

Niki and Mylo are examples of young professional staff members who were on the brink of leaving the institution and stayed because of the connection between their roles and their passion for student success. Role clarity plays an important role in their stories because it is a contributing factor to their retention, at least in the short term.

Role clarity connected to personal passion can have a long-term effect on one's career as well. Audra, who was not looking for a career in higher education specifically, described her experience of discovering the role and its link to her passion with great enthusiasm:

> It's really powerful. When I was being interviewed for this position, I couldn't believe that this was a full-time position at an institution. I think that speaks to the commitment

> of the institution to really support civic engagement and especially diverse students, Black students, LatinX, AAPI, and so many diverse groups. The way I'm able to interact with students, it’s in a range of ways.

She described a particularly impactful experience from her first year in her role which engages students in civic activities as part of their holistic education journey:

> I couldn't tell you how powerful it was to walk through the state capitol with about 30 young people, Black student leaders, staff there, professors joining us. It was just really beautiful experience. Those are the types of ways we empower students and reach students. We work alongside student groups to make it fun, right? We want to make civic engagement fun for people. So, being able to not just encourage them but also give them these opportunities to have fun while they're making a difference in this world.

As a study participant who did not enter the higher education field through a direct path from college or graduate school, Audra elaborated on her view of her career in the long term:

> Yes, I got this question asked recently. You know, the purpose of being in higher ed, to me, is really being able to support students in so many ways and our next generation of leaders. Whether you're a professor, whether you're on the student affairs side, whether you are working in the cafeteria, right? We all have those touchpoints with students. For me, working with youth is a passion. So, I do see myself being in this field for quite a long time.

Clarification, or role clarity, should be an important component of onboarding new staff. It is the first step that begins to distinguish onboarding from orientation, which is limited to compliance related activities. It is also the step that directly addresses role ambiguity, which is among the main role stressors leading to turnover among higher education staff (Curran & Prottas, 2017).

Clarification should involve more than a review of job descriptions and organizational charts – although those are important. The process should be hands-on, directly involving supervisors early in the onboarding process. During onboarding, supervisors can play an important bridge-building role between the formalities of the institution and the particulars of the department and role. This could help new employees understand their roles earlier, without having to feel like they are on their own to figure out the details. Finally, role clarification is especially important in the university setting because of the connection between student-facing staff roles and the higher social purpose served by the institutions. When staff members are able to connect their roles to their personal passion for student success, the institution is more likely to retain those staff members, even in the face of adversity from internal frustrations or external pressures.

Theme 3: "The Values Emphasized During Onboarding Align with My Personal Beliefs"

Culture is a broad category within onboarding that includes providing employees with a sense of institutional norms – both formal and informal. Within a university setting, the culture of the institution is critical for staff employees to understand. Universities are rich in traditions and history, and these characteristics are important aspects of how the institution defines itself. Universities are also institutions with important norms and idiosyncrasies such as the dynamics between faculty and staff. How and when the culture of the university is introduced to new staff employees are important factors in establishing organizational fit and commitment.

The first sub-theme that emerged from this section of the research is that institutional missions do matter. When a university's mission and culture are aligned, it can lead to a more coherent and effective institution. The mission statement is a key component of a university's identity. It reflects what the institution stands for and what it aspires to achieve (Devies et al., 2022). A number of participants mentioned the mission of the university as something they had seen, heard, or learned in their first year. Several considered the fit between the university's mission and their personal values as important to them, even before they joined as employees. The second sub-theme related to culture is the institutional tendency to go further in introducing new students to the mission than it did with introducing new staff to the mission. For example, some study participants mentioned a course that the university mandates for first-semester students. The course introduces students to the liberal arts, university history, university policies, campus resources and opportunities. There may be an easily implemented improvement for university leaders to make based on this insight. The third sub-theme that became apparent from the interviews is that culture is more than the mission. Institutional culture is a powerful signal to staff that can affirm or alienate, depending on the institution's norms, and values. Lachlan described how he learned about this in his first year by explaining, "My first semester I was told to take the semester to really just understand our culture here and understand the landscape of not only the department but the university as a whole." For Lachlan, this was an important step to understanding how comfortable he would be at the university.

Sub-Theme 1: Missions Matter

Several study participants mentioned the mission of the university as important to them. Some mentioned that it was the mission that attracted them to the university in the first place. Some, like Mylo, mentioned the mission as their reason for remaining engaged in their work. When reflecting on why he has not left the university during some of his moments of frustration, Mylo stated, "Our mission is to support students and I can see the effects of how my programming enhances the student experience".

Mia also provided a response that sheds light on the importance of a university's mission when asked what keeps her committed to her work and the institution:

> I genuinely really do like the mission of the university. I think the fact that our students are not just involved in academics but really, connecting that to their involvements and service and being good stewards of the community, that part of the mission really resonates with me. So, I'm someone who can't work at a place where I don't believe in its mission or what we're working towards. So, that is something that I really genuinely do love about this university.

She provided an anecdote from her first year with additional evidence:

> We were in an officewide retreat where we ran through some of these things and really broke it down; what does it actually mean and then how does the provosts' directives, how these campus life pillars, how do all these pieces come together and connect to that larger mission? So, that was also something that I liked because I don't think I've seen a lot of other schools have some of these things down in writing, and if you don't have it down in writing, then the target is always moving. So, I liked that. Any directive that we've been given, even the directives keep moving and changing, always do connect back to that larger mission.

When asked about when this mission alignment became apparent to her, Mia noted that her awareness of it began during the interview process:

> When the mission and vision stood out to me was in that interview process because I was like, 'How do I connect this?' Not just through my answers, but do I resonate with it when I'm walking into an interview. So, it happened beforehand, but then it got reinforced several times over in this past year.

This is an important insight as university leaders consider how to make the right first impression when recruiting talent. Mia provides evidence that some part of her decision to join the university was based on the language put forward by the institution. She went further, discussing how mission alignment was a factor to her individual and team's productivity:

> We have a really great team and I think we produce a lot. Like our deliverables, I personally think, are insane. I think our office, just by nature of being the student involvement and leadership office, just has high expectations when it comes to being student facing, and the amount of events that we need to pump out and the amount of community building that we need to do to make sure that students feel they belong at this university, especially post pandemic when they're having a crisis of needing to feel a sense of belonging. I think our office is tasked with a lot of being on that frontline for the students and I think we do a pretty great job. So, I really do like our team, and I like that we're collaborative and we support one another. So, that's keeping me here.

Unpacking Mia's experiences reveals a few important insights for university leaders related to culture. The institution's mission is something that is visible and prospective employees can rely on it to influence their decision to join a university. Mission alignment can be a motivating factor leading to employee engagement and productivity, as Mia described. And, importantly in the context of this study, mission alignment can be a factor for staff retention.

Although the explicit aspects of a university's culture such as the mission and vision are easy to find on web sites and promotional materials, some staff members were introduced to those details after joining the institution. Unlike Mia, Niki did not experience learning about the university's mission as part of her onboarding or introduction to the institution:

> It wasn't part of the onboarding of, 'Hey, welcome to the University,' but more so in our team setting. This is something we do annually, anyway. So, that's where those conversations happen. So, we actually just did our professional staff training last week,

> and once again we kind of went back. 'These are the missions of the university, Campus Life, and our department.' So, that is more, like I said, less of an onboarding piece, but more of an annual kind of refresher, almost.

Despite these differences, Niki's experience is similar to Mia's in the importance she places on the mission now that it is apparent:

> I do feel like when I hear and understand these mission and visions, I relate to it and can see myself in them, right? Thinking about our team's mission in particular, talking about we want to be an environment of support, an environment of care, as these students are transitioning. So, I really feel connected to that because that is how I approach my work, and I think the university is just kind of the same way, where it's - I see and hear these things, where it's like I feel good about the work that I'm doing because the institution shares the same values as I do.

Sub-Theme 2: What's Good for the Students is Good for the Staff

For many universities, the culture of providing student support programming is apparent. It is well documented that programming efforts to support and retain college students can lead to improved outcomes such as engagement and graduation rates. However, some study participants noted that the same supportive culture provided for the students is not always provided for the staff who are the ones delivering that programming. The university at the center of this case study requires a 101-level course for all first-year students. University documents state that the course provides an introduction to the liberal arts at the university, university policies, campus resources and opportunities. During class sessions and out of class experiences, students are asked to reflect, explore and create 4-year plans. Mylo expressed his frustration related to this:

> They really do put in a lot to orient students to this university through that course and I think they only give us a glimpse of some random information about the university when we first start, but we don't do anything to continue to learn about the school, at least during our first 90 days, and it would be nice. Just those first few minutes in that orientation is not enough.

He continued, proving his suggestion for improvement, specifically noting that a portion of the 101 course introduces students to some details about the campus including the namesakes of buildings and their historical context:

> I think they should probably have all of us take the 101 course. I believe in branding, and I feel like branding helps build pride, helps build a community. When you're trying to create a shared vision, you have to set the tone and the only way you can do that is by stating what you want. If you want people to know these different buildings, let's really get into it. Let's come up with an activity that connects people to these different buildings and these different donors and everything.

Layla expressed a similar sentiment regarding the opportunity to provide new staff with the same lens to view the university's cultural priorities as that provided to the students:

> I also had this thought the other day; if our work has to do with students, we should have some sort of shared trainings. Everybody needs to understand dialogue. Everybody needs to understand JEDI (Justice, Equity, Diversity, Inclusion) work. The mission of the school is around supporting society in its growth for positive change. It's very liberal arts mission, but I don't see that translated in how we execute things as a school or how we discuss things as a school, how we move forward with things – it doesn't seem very liberal arts. So, for me, what would make it liberal arts would be those shared trainings

> amongst offices around our understanding of the things we want students to understand. So, even if you are working in the physical education center, I still think you should have the training on justice equity, diversity inclusion and dialogue.

The 101 course and other formal trainings are not the only differences noted by study participants about the culture of appearing to value students more than staff. In recalling his first days at the university, Ford described the difference he experienced, after seeing new students welcomed with university-branded items:

> My introduction to the university was not what I expected just because you typically come into an office in student affairs, campus life, there's a lot of swag that is given away. There's usually like a big deal made, I guess, which maybe I just got spoiled a little bit at my previous institution. But when I first started, I remember I was shown my office and it was like, 'This is your office,' and the office was bare. There was not even a pen. No pens, no Post-its. It was just a bare office with my computer. I was like, 'Okay.' And people were just kind of doing their thing. That just kind of, I think for me, set the tone.

This is potentially an accessible set of concerns to address. That is not to say that the concerns are not substantial. In Ford's case, he recalls his first day experience as the first clue that the culture of the university was not a fit for him. He used everything that he experienced after his bare office experience to confirm his initial feeling of discomfort. And ultimately, when he resigned from the university, he noted this experience of what the students get and the staff does not, as the first sign of the "toxic culture" that he encountered as an employee.

Sub-Theme 3: Culture is More than Mission

The culture of the institution shows up in many ways, most of them implicit, according to study participants. Many described aspects of the university's culture as what can be felt, and not necessarily seen or shown in words. Study participants who expressed strong organizational commitment described the institution's culture in positive terms, including supportive and inclusive. Importantly, however, most study participants did not attribute the cultural nuances they described to the university. They often attributed those factors to their supervisors and teams. Those cultural characteristics are difficult to include in a mission statement, but are important to demonstrate in the daily work, especially for staff who attach their passions to their roles.

Nehah describes it as finding belonging, as she explains, "I think the people that were around me were important in knowing the culture. Seeing my identities represented in others was one of those things that kind of helped me to feel like I belonged." Kennedy described the culture as supportive because she was encouraged to implement her innovative ideas. She recalled the supportive nature of the university as a reason she enjoys and is committed to her work:

> I do genuinely enjoy the work that I'm doing. I am in a unique position, I think, where I am charged with a program that has a lot of resources to support it. So, whenever I come up with an idea, as long as I can justify it, I'm given the leeway to just run with it. One of the programs that we have this year is actually an idea that I pitched when I was interviewing. I presented on it and then once they hired me, I was like, 'Can I make this happen?' They were like, 'Sure.' So, that's really cool. I love having that creative sandboxing opportunity.

Kennedy went on to note that culture is created at every level, not just at the top of the university, and not just during onboarding activities. She discussed the tone set by her manager:

> He has been such a great manager and I feel very supported by him. I'm not sure that I'll be able to find another supervisor like him in a different position, but again, this is, I

> think, an instance of that person creating the culture, not necessarily the culture being in place by the office.

There is an important insight here that should be examined as a potential factor influencing staff decisions to remain with the institution or to leave. Kennedy makes a point to note that the culture she appreciates so much is a function of her individual manager, not a something she feels coming from the university. In fact, she is concerned that she might not find that culture elsewhere within the university. This may ultimately be a factor for her decision to leave the institution, rather than explore opportunities for growth internally, because Kennedy's association with the culture she appreciates is with the individual, not with the institution.

Layla had a similar experience, finding aspects of the institutional culture that she appreciates as part of her specific team, but not necessarily as part of the university. She explained:

> I'm not political, I'm not trying to climb any kind of ladder. If a place is not accepting of me, then I don't want to be there. So, when I look at the university, I wouldn't want to work anywhere else but my current team. There's no other office that I would want to work in or move to. I'm not about to hop to another office because I don't feel safe there. I feel safe where I am, and I love the work that I'm doing, and this has actually supported me in finding my next steps professionally.

Culture is a broad category that includes providing staff members with a sense of organizational norms – both formal, such as mission and vision statements, and informal, such as internal politics. Universities often have unique cultural aspects that set them apart from other types of organizations. Traditions are important, academic freedom is a core value, and critical thinking is an expectation. The unique aspects of university culture provide an opportunity for institutions to attract talent based on cultural fit, and to retain talent based on belongingness, values alignment, and a sense of inclusion. Unfortunately, evidence from this study reveals inconsistent experiences related to institutional culture from participants. This presents an opportunity for campus leaders to strengthen the ties between university-level mission statements and departmental responsibilities, and to do so explicitly for newly hired professional staff. Whereas a clear connection to the university's mission and culture is a factor that increases organizational commitment, an unclear connection comes with the risk of losing employees who question their sense of belonging.

Theme 4: "Beginning to Bridge Those Gaps and Relationships Early"

Connection refers to the key interpersonal relationships, support mechanisms, and information networks that new employees need to establish upon entering a new organization. As scholars have noted in researching talent management in corporate settings, connection has a special role in the onboarding process because it can directly influence a range of important organizational outcomes, including new employee job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, intentions to remain, and turnover (Bauer, 2013; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). As important as it is, connection is the least common aspect of onboarding among most organizations, which perform at "Passive" or "High-Potential" levels. Connection is the level of onboarding that scholars define as "Proactive," or Level 3, characterized by systematically organizing onboarding with a strategic human resource management approach. Only about 20 percent of organizations achieve this level (Bauer, 2010).

However, while most organizations lag in the prioritization of connection in the onboarding of new employees, evidence from this study reveals that some supervisors understand the importance of connection and become proactive, themselves, in bringing new staff onto their teams. Several study participants provided evidence for the first sub-theme, the early role their supervisors played in making sure they established formal and informal networks within the university. Lachlan recalled one of his first experiences as a staff member, “My supervisor set up so many meetings with different campus partners for me to know the campus landscape and things I needed to do for my job specifically.” Similar experiences were shared by other participants, although rarely attributed to the university’s onboarding activities.

Whether supervisors arranged these connections because of specific training or because of empathy derived from their own experiences is unclear. What is clear, as explored in the second sub-theme, is the sentiment expressed by those who benefitted from early connections by gaining confidence in their work and a sense of belonging, compared to the study participant who resigned in part because of a lack of relationships. Reflecting on the main reasons for leaving the university, Ford lamented, “I never felt like anyone genuinely tried to make a connection with me.”

A third sub-theme emerged when a number of study participants mentioned specific programs that helped them establish important connections in their first year at the university. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) were referenced as especially important to increasing organizational commitment. When asked about staff retention, Mylo put it plainly, saying, “These resource groups really are a saving grace and a lot of people have said that.”

Sub-Theme 1: Supervisors to the Rescue (again)

Lachlan attributed his exposure to connections around the university to the onboarding experience. This was not merely due to his supervisor taking initiative soon after Lachlan started in his role. His supervisor went further, by beginning the process of establishing Lachlan’s connections before his first day of work. Lachlan recounted:

> Before I even got to the university, and I first opened my email I had all these calendar invites for lunch meetings that were already set up. My manager set up meetings with different campus partners from external departments that I might not work with every day, but maybe occasionally on projects and initiatives.

This story from Lachlan is an excellent example of how strategic talent management begins before an employee's first day on the job. During the hiring process leaders and organizations can take steps to make new employees feel valued and welcomed. And once the hire becomes official, which in Lachlan's case was when his university email address was activated, steps can be taken to signal an environment of support. It is possible that the early action taken by his supervisor, at least in part, influenced Lachlan's description of his onboarding experience as "great."

The appreciation expressed by Lachlan for this tactic organized by his supervisor was shared by Hannah when she described her experiences. Though it happened after she started her job, Hannah praised her supervisor for designing a task that she attributed as part of her onboarding experience. She recalled the task as a relationship-building assignment that "made such a phenomenal impact on my transition into the university." When probed for details she explained what her supervisor said to her:

> He said, 'Your first month, I just want you to go on a listening tour.' So, that is what I got to do. I got to conduct a listening tour with people all over campus. I kid you not, from that moment through my first year, I was able to cultivate fifty-plus relationships, collaborations, partnerships. I really give kudos to that assignment that I had during my onboarding because that assignment made all of the difference in the long term.

Other study participants recalled similar experiences with their supervisors, however they did not associate these experiences with the onboarding process. One insight related to this is that many of these new staff members directed their commitment to their individual supervisors and team, while offering little credit to the university in general. This could be an important factor influencing retention. Ford captured this insight in one of his responses, “If you leave it up to the department, things sometimes can fall through the cracks, and people can feel a little bit more excluded.”

Sam provided another excellent example of the role supervisors play in establishing connections as he recalled, “My supervisor was really supportive and she helped me not only navigate the university, but she connected me with key people that I could build relationships with across campus. He elaborated when asked for an example:

> She provided me with a contact list and said, ‘Do what you can to try and grab coffee with these people at some point in time in your first six weeks.’ So I did that, and while I didn’t have a lot of structure, I had people, and that helped me. I had people to build relationships with that I was going to work with on a regular basis, but I also had people that worked in completely different functional areas that were able to just tell me about their experience at the university, and I think that helped me as well.

Niki offered a suggestion for university leaders based on the approach her supervisor takes with their team:

> I’ll give you our team’s example where we have buddies within the department. If you’re new, they’ll pair you up with someone who’s been around for a little while, and they’ll be your buddy. I think on the university level, something like that could also be beneficial, right?

The importance of an employee's direct supervisor in establishing early connections comes through clearly in this data. While the study participants were enthusiastic and positive in their reflections of their supervisor's role in establishing connections, Nikky's insight is a powerful one. The positive feelings are only associated with the supervisor, not the institution. There appears to be an opportunity for the university to share the responsibility, and ultimately the credit, for establishing connections for new employees with their supervisors.

Sub-Theme 2: Confidence in the Work and Belonging

Making early connections is important, and not just for the sake of making friends across campus. Several study respondents shared how their early connections helped them gain confidence in their work, access to resources, and earlier overall effectiveness on the job. These experiences affirm the research that suggests that Level 3 onboarding, which is only achieved with the inclusion of the fourth "C", Connection, can help organizations gain a significant competitive advantage (Bauer, 2013). As discussed, this competitive advantage can be established through increased retention. Importantly, it can also be established, or increased, through greater productivity. Bauer (2013) writes that organizations that focus on onboarding reported first-year goal completion of 62 percent versus 17 percent for firms that lagged in their onboarding efforts.

As Lachlan continued providing details of what made his onboarding experience great, he elaborated on what followed his supervisor's initiative to schedule lunch meetings before Lachlan's first day on the job:

> We were going to lunch with people from office of undergraduate education, student involvement and leadership transitions, all kinds of other teams across campus. We were

> learning from the financial department. So, just meeting everybody. It gave me a good sense of who does what here. Beginning to bridge those gaps and relationships early on helped me really navigate the university landscape early.

Though navigating a decentralized university can be a daunting task for a new staff employee, participants communicated that having a network established early can help make that task less intimidating. Sam shared his perspective when asked to elaborate on what came of the coffee chats and early meetings arranged by his supervisor. He suggested that it was the early connections that made his first year productive, despite other aspects of his onboarding experience being frustrating:

> Since I did not have a written rule book. I do not have any transition docs. I didn't have a playbook of any sort. I don't think that there was a lot of structure with my HR onboarding either. I think my supervisor connecting me with people that ended up really helping me navigate the work. It was the people that I got to build relationships with, I think that was key for me. Especially because I didn't have all of the other structure that I might have expected.

Having had a different experience from Lachlan and Sam, Mia expressed a warning of the downside of this aspect of onboarding as she recalled delays in being able to establish connections quickly at the university by explaining, "It's hard to do this work here because it's so relational, and if you don't have relationships, it'll take you twice as long to get things done. I'm now building those relationships." She went on to describe a colleague's experience as more ideal than her own:

> So, in their first week, in contrast to mine, they got to meet folks in the student center operations office, civic and community engagement, our campus partners that deal with

> case management, and things like that. So, even if they didn't know everyone yet or would remember everyone, at least they were able to visualize a little bit more of the campus life structure and how we're all connected, and conversations about mission and vision.

Mia lamented that her colleague was able to get up to speed faster and take on larger projects because of their cross-team exposure. Fortunately, Mia was able to begin building relationships before becoming disillusioned about her role or the university.

On the other hand, Ford, the one study participant who resigned from the university after less than one year on the staff, made it clear as he recalled his experiences that the lack of connection with his internal team was the main factor that contributed to his departure, which hurt the university in terms of retention and productivity:

> I guess, driving factor for me deciding that I wanted to leave was more so the culture in my office, the office that I directly worked in. I guess my relationships or lack thereof with my teammates and just the way that I became made to feel in the office, that was the main driving factor for me actually exiting my role there.

When asked what the university should do differently to retain and get the most out of student-facing staff in the future, Ford provided a response that reinforced the literature describing the importance of Connection as the key to a complete onboarding experience. His response centered around establishing early connections during the onboarding period:

> It's as simple as having the new employee welcome session and making it a requirement that everyone goes to that. That way employees have their early onset engagement with all the other new employees and maybe they can make connections that way. They can

> ask questions to really feel like they're not just filling a position, but more like they're someone that's going to add value to the university to the team that they're joining.

Ford went on, noting that there are different connection tactics a university could deploy:

> I think the institution as a whole can really specifically try to connect – and this is, I guess, more an HR thing – but try to connect with those newer employees to have a 30-day check-in, asking, 'Hey, you've been in your role for 30 days. How's it going?' This could be a survey or something along those lines. Or even sending out a newsletter saying, 'Excited to announce that campus life has added three new staff members. This is them. If you see them on campus, say hi.' So, that way it feels like I am noticed when someone says, 'Hey, I read about you in the newsletter. I saw the email that went out about you.' Or even having, something for all newer employees just to kind of get together and really network with each other. It doesn't have to be some grand thing.

Most study participants agreed with Sam's perspective, that early connections facilitated by one's supervisor can be powerful enough to overcome other onboarding shortcomings. However, Ford provides a cautionary tale, stressing that the university should take care to include this as a part of institutional programming, rather than leaving it up to individual supervisors.

Sub-Theme 3: Employee Resource Groups (ERGs)

One additional finding that emerged from the interviews is the importance of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) in establishing meaningful connections, a sense of belonging, and early organizational commitment. Employee Resource Groups (ERGs), also known as Affinity Groups or Business Resource Groups, are voluntary, employee-led groups within an organization that bring together individuals who share common characteristics, interests, or experiences. These groups provide a supportive and inclusive community for employees who may have similar backgrounds, identities, or life experiences (Welbourne et al., 2017).

University documents describe five ERGs within the institution as opportunities to connect with colleagues and coworkers and make a difference in enhancing the university community. The five ERGs and their mission statements are:

- The Black Employee Network
    - The Black Employee Network aims to provide support and build a community for black employees and their allies.
    - This group promotes individual and collective growth through various resources and networking opportunities, focusing on areas such as health and wellness, community service, cultural events, social gatherings, engagement, mentorship, and personal and professional development opportunities.
- The Latinx Employee Resource Network
    - The Latinx Employee Resource Network seeks to uplift, support, and amplify the cultural diversity of Latinx employees by providing resources for professional development, visibility, and social kinship. This ERG envisions becoming a leader in addressing inclusivity and advocating for the empowerment of the university's Latinx community's distinct needs. This group is open to all university Latinx employees and all allies.
- New ERG for Asian and Pacific Islander Employees (OFFICIAL NAME IS TBD)
    - This group is committed to cultivating an uplifting and inclusive work environment by supporting, empowering, and celebrating the rich and diverse backgrounds of Asian and Pacific Islander employees through networking,

personal and professional development, social gatherings, community service, cultural events, and mentorship.

- Pride Employee Network
  - The Pride Employee Network (strives to celebrate, support, and recognize the diverse community of LGBTQ+ employees by providing resources for educational growth, awareness and advocacy, and social connections. The ERG envisions becoming a leader in addressing inequities and advocating for its LGBTQ+ community's diverse needs. This group is open to all LGBTQ+ employees and all allies.
- Veterans Employee Network
  - The Veterans Employee Network seeks to promote a sense of belonging for veterans through organization, recognition, networking, and resources. The ERG aims to increase the visibility veterans and veteran services and foster a greater appreciation by the university community for the service and sacrifice made by veterans and their families to preserve our way of life.

Mylo expressed a sentiment shared by other study participants, as he discussed his organizational commitment to the institution and credited one ERG for his growth in confidence in his role:

> The Black Employee Network has completely shifted my connection to the institution. Just being aware of what's available as far as a brave space for people that share some similar identities has definitely provided a different type of institutional knowledge for me and has supported my confidence in my role.

When asked to elaborate specifically on how the ERG helped increase his organizational commitment, Mylo shared his perspective and what he had gathered from others:

> I'm glad the ERGs got started up. I think that's something that should be highlighted of something that helps people feel connected. You're meeting with people that feel kind of disconnected from this institution and there's so many things about our identities that help it feel like this is comfortable for me. These resource groups really are a saving grace and a lot of people have said that. I know that I can speak to it. That's the reason why I just feel at home, because of the Black Employee Network. I just don't understand why HR is not focusing on that because it should be part of retention.

Layla recalled how she learned about the Black Employee Network:

> So, it definitely was in a newsletter, but of course most people don't read that. I'm close to one of my coworkers in my office that is in the Black Employee Network and there are two other people in my office that are part of it. One of them told me about it and invited me to their stuff.

Given the importance study respondents placed on the ERGs, I probed for clarity on how the university was sharing information about them. Layla shared that the leadership of the Black Employee Network had asked a similar question:

> That is something that ERG leadership asked in its assessment, 'Who do you see sharing information about our work and ERGs in general, and encouraging you to take part in those?' It's generally staff that are going to tell other staff. Of course, traditionally, word of mouth is the strongest marketing that you have, but also it should be easy to find.

In addition to formal ERGs, Sam mentioned informal points of connection as important to his engagement and motivation. Like others, Sam credited co-workers for bringing these connection opportunities to his attention, rather than crediting the institution as he described:

> I was able to get involved with a group of staff who had been at the university for less than three years, and we had a regular lunch that we would get. It was probably every other week or maybe once a month. We would just kind of hang out and socialize, and I think that was also helpful. I think my supervisor connected me to it and recommended I reach out. Then I also reached out to join a book club through one of the staff networking groups and that was kind of a good way to get to know people.

The enthusiasm with which study participants discussed these mechanisms for connection was enlightening. Whether formal or informal, making early connections through groups sharing common interests and identities is important.

Of the Four Cs of onboarding, as defined by Bauer (2010), connection appears to be an outsized factor for the institution and for individuals. For the institution, including connection as part of onboarding programming makes the difference between passive and proactive onboarding, which can result in positive business results measured by increased employee retention and increased productivity (Bauer, 2013). Both of these improved metrics can create competitive advantages for organizations. For individuals, study participants affirmed the research by crediting early connections with their feelings of belongingness and their ability to work across teams.

A key takeaway is that several study participants credited their supervisors with taking the initiative to establish early connections on their behalf. Some study participants attached the actions of their supervisors to their onboarding experience, however several did not. Those who credited their supervisor seemed to align their organizational commitment with that specific supervisor or their particular team, rather than the university. This could factor into retention decisions at a later point. Failing to establish connections on the team or across the university is a risk factor for employee productivity and retention.

Another key takeaway is the opportunity presented by Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). The connections formed within these kinds of groups, whether they are formally named ERGs or not, were highly valued by study participants. Introducing ERGs into onboarding programming appears to be an opportunity for institutions.

Summary

Professional staff from three different teams within the Campus Life unit of this mid-sized private university in the southern United States, including one staff member who recently resigned, were grateful for the opportunity to share their onboarding experiences, whether they described those experiences in positive, neutral, or critical terms. All participants expressed pride in their roles and their direct connection to helping the students at the university persist and ultimately graduate. Many of the study participants were student-workers during their own undergraduate matriculation and developed their passion for student-facing campus roles during those undergraduate experiences. All study participants agreed that staff retention is a problem in their respective areas, and that serious efforts should be made to improve the university's retention of talented, passionate professional staff. The irony of their focus on student retention in their jobs, compared to the lack of focus on retention of the staff, was not lost on them.

Some study participants were more experienced than others, with some in supervisory roles. However, all were still in the early stages of their careers. For many, this was their first job after graduating from graduate school. This commonality led to some interesting findings, including the frequent emphasis on the importance of setting up benefits for the first time.

The data collected demonstrate that study participants most frequently reflected on their onboarding experiences as heavily focused on compliance-related activities. Those who participated in the university's official welcome session in person recalled the experience as a half-day session in the HR building. Whether the session was attended in-person or remotely, it was largely characterized as being focused on the benefits, forms, university identification cards, and obtaining a parking pass. This ties closely to what Bauer (2010) describes as Level 1 onboarding, which is often characterized as orientation due to the singular nature of the event. Among the study participants, there was a range of experiences reported, with in-person experiences being recalled more clearly and favorably, while remote or recorded experiences were more difficult to recall and described more critically. The findings support the research asserting that most organizations engage in Level 1 onboarding, which is unsurprising due to the legal nature of some of the tasks such as Title IX training. Interestingly, several study participants elaborated on the importance of the benefits portion of their onboarding. When probed for a better understanding of this finding, it became apparent that many respondents were anxious about choosing their own employment benefits because they had never done so prior to joining the university in their first full-time job.

After discussions about compliance, participant responses about the other aspects of best-practice onboarding were rarely attributed to university efforts to continue the onboarding process. This became evident when discussing the concept of role clarity. There was a frequent refrain of figuring things out by doing the job. The common analogy of "building the plane while flying" was used by Sam to make the point. Where the university left off, the supervisor picked up, according to most participants. The role of the supervisor was critical in establishing role clarity for those who felt that they had achieved it in their first year. For the participant who had resigned, the lack of a relationship with their supervisor played a substantial role. Finally, as it relates to clarification, a clear understanding of the roles played by these student-facing professionals led to strong feelings of pride and passion about their work.

Universities are rich with traditions and norms that make understanding the culture an important aspect of employee's feelings of fit and belonging. Some study participants were able to recall learning about the university's mission at some point, usually after their perceived onboarding period had passed. Those who were familiar with the mission usually spoke with pride about being affiliated with the university and aligned with the mission. Beyond the mission statement, culture is expressed in other ways around a university. One cultural aspect that raised criticism among study participants is the tendency of the university to treat students as higher priorities than staff when it comes to immersing in campus culture. Many respondents also mentioned their identities and intersectionality as important factors for fit and belonging, attributing positive comments to the campus culture for being inclusive. Cultural connections, if identified early and attributed to the institution rather than individual relationships, could be powerful enough to contribute to retaining some of the university's valuable staff talent.

Congruent with much of the research focused on onboarding, connection emerged as the most influential factor in study participants' description of their organizational commitment, overall engagement, intent to stay, and in one case, main reason for leaving. A few participants noted that meaningful connections were made as part of their onboarding process. Most reiterated the importance of their supervisor in establishing initial cross-campus connections and did not credit the university or the onboarding process. Regardless of the origin of the connections, participants agreed that they were more confident and effective in their roles, at least in part, because of them. An interesting insight from discussions about connections was the frequent and enthusiastic mentions of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) and other on-campus networks as the source of belongingness and organizational commitment. None of the participants learned about these networks as part of their onboarding experiences, which highlights an opportunity for university leaders.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Much attention from scholars and campus leaders is given to the importance of university programs that help students persist and ultimately succeed by graduating and improving their lives as individuals, as well as society as a whole. Rightfully so. Scholars have provided substantial evidence that student success programs improve college success rates, and college graduates add value to society through their productivity, civic engagement, and improved health outcomes (Becker et al., 2009; Light, 2004, Wolniak et al., 2016). Yet with all we know about the positive impacts of these programs on college success and subsequent civic engagement, relatively little attention has been given to the professional staff members who have the jobs of implementing those programs. What we do know is that these are non-faculty staff members, typically in the early stages of their careers. Those two characteristics have contributed to an underrepresentation in the research on talent management in higher education, which is more robust on faculty members and staff members who have been retained long enough to be considered to be high-potential leaders.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to better understand how and to what extent newly hired non-faculty professional staff are onboarded in higher education in order to inform campus leaders on opportunities to increase organizational commitment and retention of this important segment of employee talent. Ultimately, increasing institutional culture, role clarity, organizational commitment, and retention of valuable staff members could be a competitive advantage for universities facing increasing competitive pressures. Using Barney's (1991) framework of the Resource Based View, as updated by Rothaermel (2013), as the primary theoretical foundation, the study sought to gain insights on the onboarding experiences of Campus Life professional staff members who lead student-facing programs on a mid-sized private university campus. The following section will address findings related to the research questions.

Discussion of Findings

This case study research was designed to examine the perceptions of professional staff members across three teams within the Campus Life unit of a university with regard to their onboarding experiences when they were newly hired. The following research question was posed with the goal of understanding the perceptions of these professional staff members: How do newly hired non-faculty professional staff at a small private university reflect upon their onboarding experiences? This research question was addressed by conducting ten semi-structured interviews with staff members, asking open-ended questions to allow for as much elaboration for analysis as possible. Though interviews allowed for divergence, each participant responded to a set of common questions on onboarding best practices, defined by Bauer (2010) as Compliance, Clarity, Culture, and Connection.

An additional objective of the research was to better understand the intent of the institution when designing and delivering onboarding programs for newly hired professional staff. The second research question, which asked how institutions and HR leaders describe the onboarding process for newly hired non-faculty professional staff, was primarily addressed by reviewing internal documents and having purposeful meetings with campus leaders including individuals from the Campus Life leadership team, university Human Resources, and the university's executive leadership team.

Considering the two research questions together, data from this study were organized into four themes which mapped onto the Four Cs of onboarding best practices, Compliance, Clarification, Culture, and Connection (Bauer, 2010). Data from each theme were further analyzed to form sub-themes which comprised the details of the study's findings. Overall, data suggest that the university is similar to other types of complex organizations, such as corporations, in the context of onboarding. Findings from the staff interviews and university document reviews revealed that the university's approach to onboarding, like that of most organizations, is heavily focused on compliance and does not extend to the other areas of best practice onboarding. While staff members shared insights related to all aspects of best practice onboarding, they often attributed the non-compliance experiences – establishing role clarity, understanding institutional culture, and establishing valuable connections – to factors unrelated to the university's onboarding process, such as their supervisors or co-workers.

The first theme, "Met with HR and did all the benefits stuff" yielded insights related to what most staff members considered to be their university onboarding process. Their experiences were primarily recalled as orientation-type activities such as completing required forms and trainings in a classroom or online. One sub-theme that emerged from the data was the high level of interest in the process of setting up benefits for the first time. For many of the study participants, their Campus Life job was their first full-time job. They expressed anxiety about selecting the appropriate benefits package since they had never done so prior to joining the university. Given the high interest, importance and anxiety surrounding this aspect of the onboarding process, there may be opportunities for university leaders to execute this process with greater care and intention in the future.

Once employees complete the necessary compliance-related activities, they are ready to begin in their new roles. University documents continued to provide advice for the first week, first month, and first year. However, study participants largely considered themselves to have completed the onboarding process once they began their day-to-day work. The process of gaining clarity in that work was the focus of the second theme, “A lot of it was figuring things out as we went.” Data consistently suggested that role clarity was gained through factors not attributed to the central efforts of the university. Numerous participants mentioned a lack of training on systems, lack of a playbook for the job, and lack of shared documents to get them up to speed on their daily tasks. Individual supervisors were given high praise and significant credit for filling in gaps in role clarity perceived to be left by the institution. While these dynamics are addressable by including role-specific information in onboarding, one sub-theme emerged to offer a unique opportunity for university leaders to address. As roles and responsibilities became clearer to study participants, their pride in their roles also became clearer. Study participants expressed pride in working for a university on initiatives that contribute positively to society. Some went further, connecting the pride they had in their roles to their desire to remain with the university rather than pursue employment elsewhere.

An organization’s culture can also be a source of pride for employees. The third theme that emerged from the data, “The values emphasized during onboarding align with my personal beliefs” supports this assertion. Universities have strong traditions and important cultural norms and nuances. Fitting into the culture can mean the difference between feeling a sense of belonging and feeling the desire to leave the institution. Data from this study suggests that new staff employees take pride in the mission of the university and their personal alignment with it. Several participants recalled seeing the mission of the university early in their employment, whether during onboarding or at a later point. However, culture is more than a mission statement. Politics and other behavioral factors define the personality of an institution. A lack of understanding of those cultural aspects of the university led to sentiments of frustration among study participants. Connecting the university's mission to the daily work and culture experienced by new staff employees is an opportunity that should be considered for enhancing onboarding programs.

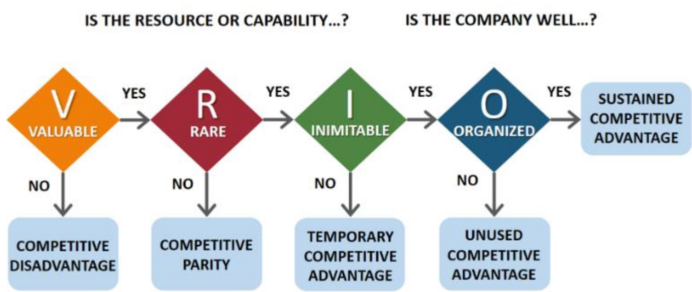
One important way that new staff members learn the politics and culture of a university is through relationships and networks. Data from the fourth theme, "Beginning to bridge those gaps and relationships early", demonstrate the importance of this. Supervisors who prioritize making connections for new employees are especially valued by their staff. Study participants frequently credited their supervisors with connecting them with individuals and networks across the campus to establish a sense of university norms and to deepen their pool of resources for managing their work. Throughout the interviews, these networks were frequently credited with increasing confidence and effectiveness of newly hired staff. The most important vehicle for networking, according to the data collected, was Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). These employee-led affinity groups were credited with providing staff members with a strong sense of belonging and overall positive engagement with the university. Specific ERGs, including the Black Employee Network and the Pride Employee Network, were mentioned as key reasons for the commitment and retention of those who mentioned them. Importantly, neither the interviewees nor the university documents connected the ERGs to institution's onboarding activities. Given the critical nature of establishing early connections, and the strong loyalty to these groups described by study participants, the data highlights that ERGs should be introduced with more intention and earlier.

Findings Mapped to the Resource Based View Theory

Because this study utilized Barney's (1991) Resource Based View theory, as updated by Rothaermel (2013), it was helpful to consider key research findings within the four concepts of the Valuable, Rare, Inimitable, Organized (VRIO) framework:

Figure 6

VRIO Theoretical Framework



Study data were mapped to each of the concepts to help understand if university leaders are utilizing the internal resource of staff talent as a competitive advantage for the institution.

An organization's internal resources are considered valuable in the RBV context if they increase differentiation from alternatives enough for customers to perceive value. The professional staff members interviewed in this study fit this description due to the nature of their previous work experience, education, and the specificity of their training for their roles. Most participants had worked in Campus Life roles during their undergraduate matriculation. Some worked as residence assistants, others as peer advisors. Most study participants went on to earn master's degrees after graduating college. All study participants received specific formal training on the compliance aspects of their roles and informal training from their supervisors and colleagues on other aspects of their roles. These characteristics align study participants with the theory's definition of valuable.

Internal resources are considered rare when they are unique to an organization or not easily acquired by competitors. In this case, the professional staff members are unique to the university where they are employed. While employed by one university, that person's talent cannot be applied to another. And while the talent can be acquired by a competitor if the employee decides to leave one university for another, that process is not easy or inexpensive for either party. By the theoretical definition applied by this study, the staff members are internal resources that can be defined as rare.

If the internal resource meets the criteria of being valuable and rare it can be considered at least a temporary competitive advantage (Rothaermel, 2013). However, to move beyond this temporary status towards a sustainable competitive advantage, the internal resource must be costly to imitate or substitute. Data from this study agree with previously published data on the shrinking pool of talent within higher education staff. Study participants who were supervisors lamented the difficulty in filling open positions that has been exacerbated by high staff turnover. Meetings with the senior executive and executive director confirmed the scale of the talent shortage in higher education, and the high cost of operating in the current environment of high turnover among staff. The decreasing supply of talent in this field makes it increasingly costly to substitute lost staff with new hires. This makes the university's staff talent an inimitable resource by the definition of the RBV theory.

Finally, from the RBV theoretical perspective, if an internal resource meets the previous three criteria, it has the potential be leveraged as a competitive advantage only if the organization is positioned to take advantage of it (Rothaermel, 2013). In other words, the talented and trained professional staff employees are not sufficient on their own to become sustainable competitive advantages for universities. For this to be achieved, the institution must be capable of recognizing and exploiting the internal resources with these attributes to capture the value and establish sustainable competitive advantages.

Here is where the data analyzed in this study diverge from the theory and highlight an opportunity for campus leaders. Overwhelmingly, participants attributed the factors contributing to their understanding of institutional culture, role clarity, network connections, and organizational commitment to their supervisors and co-workers, not to the institution. The data suggest that the staff members who are satisfied, engaged, productive, and loyal feel this way despite a lack of institutional onboarding practices, rather than because of the impact of those practices. Internal documents support the data from the interviews. One detailed document entitled “Talent Management at [University Name]” defines the institution’s approach, stating, “Talent Management is the integration of four processes that help manage the talent of our community.” Those processes do not include or mention onboarding. Therefore, according to the definition of experts including Collings and Mellahi (2009), this approach to talent management is incomplete because it is not inclusive of the onboarding of early career professionals. Without a complete approach to talent management, including onboarding that aligns with best practices, the institution is not positioned to leverage its staff talent as the sustainable competitive advantage it has the potential to be.

The perspective of this study is that of the organization. Meaning, if the organization aligns with the theoretical perspective of Rothaermel (2013) then it potentially benefits by being in a stronger competitive position for talent and for students. Another interesting perspective to consider is that of the employee. It is worth viewing this research with the question of whether employees view themselves in alignment with the framework as well. Do employees view themselves as valuable (and rare and inimitable)? Or do they approach their relationship with the institution as is they are viewed as a dime-a-dozen? In either case, what might the implications be for their commitment and retention? This is a worthwhile perspective for future research, however the findings from this study may be instructive as-is, if examined through this alternate lens. It is reasonable to infer based on responses from this study that an institution's VRIO approach to talent management could catalyze a cycle that includes aligned employee attitudes, which then further contribute to improved retention. If that is the case, then the foundational theories of Human Capital and Human Resource Development interconnect with RBV in ways that could add value across multiple dimensions of the institution.

Implications

This study may provide valuable insights for university leaders who are responsible for institutional strategy and seeking new competitive advantages in an increasingly difficult staffing and enrollment environment. There are major implications that were identified through this research study. First, the findings from this study support research that includes onboarding as a necessary component of a strategic approach to talent management (Collings & Mellahi, 2009). Next, this study reinforces research that argues that best-practice onboarding activities and practices can increase employee levels of organizational commitment, organizational support, and job satisfaction (Bauer, 2010; Meyer & Bartels, 2017). Finally, this study affirms that universities may be included among eighty percent of organizations that fall short in this area by not proactively onboarding new staff members with all four best-practice elements (Bauer, 2010; Bauer, 2013). There are numerous opportunities to improve how onboarding programming is executed and communicated within universities, thus strengthening the institution's talent management approach. The RBV theory posits that investment in the internal resource of professional staff, having been defined as valuable, rare, and inimitable, has the potential to establish a sustainable competitive advantage for institutions willing to organize appropriately, in an increasingly difficult environment.

As McClure (2022) writes when describing higher education as a land of dead-end jobs, it may be asking a lot for universities to suddenly become excellent at managing talent. However, the findings of this study agree with his assertion that leaders can do something to take a step forward. He suggests doing so in three ways: Developing homegrown leaders and training managers, making career tracks and ladders explicit, and investing in coaching and cross-training (McClure, 2022). The implication of this research on advice such as this is that leaders need to consider managing talent even earlier. Before leaders can be developed and trained as managers, they need to make it through their first year on the job. The findings of this study amplify the plea for a more intentional approach to retaining our talent, so they don't resign – pun intended – to the dead-end jobs mentality.

Study Limitations

This single case was intended to explore perceptions of professional staff within a campus life unit of a mid-sized university. By design, it took a limited view, and did not incorporate the perspective of campus stakeholders outside of Campus Life. The study would have benefitted from a view across the various campus units to acquire a more complete perspective of university-wide practices in such a loosely coupled environment. In addition, since this study focused solely on staff member perceptions of their onboarding experiences, funding, budgeting, and overall economics of any suggested enhancements were not considered as part of the analysis.

Another limitation is that the methods for this study did not include a live observation of onboarding activities due to timing. Adding data generated by observation would be a step in the direction of further validating the findings of this study and may have yielded additional findings.

Importantly, as noted by one study participant, this study was limited to the experiences of staff and did not investigate any effects of staff experiences on student experiences. As staff who focus on student success, the relationship between their experiences could be instructive.

Recommendations for Practice

Through analysis of the data generated in this study, four recommendations have become apparent for campus leaders who experiencing the crisis of staff turnover, and who are seeking ways to strengthen their institution's competitive advantages in an increasingly difficult higher education environment.

First, include onboarding in the institutional approach to talent management. Strategic talent management, as defined by Collings and Mellahi (2009), includes the important clarification, "key positions are not necessarily restricted to the top management team (TMT) but also include key positions at levels lower than the TMT and may vary between operating units and indeed over time" (p. 304). The opportunity to influence these lower-level team members is often at the beginning of their employee journey. Limiting talent management efforts by not including onboarding as an important component is a missed opportunity that can be corrected. Leaders should make clear in their words and actions that talent management is a priority that begins before a new hire joins the institution, and onboarding is a critical component of the talent management process.

Second, when implementing onboarding programs, institutions should do so completely. Follow the best practices established in the research. Do not limit onboarding to a single event resembling an orientation program focused on completing forms and other compliance related activities. Invite supervisors to onboarding sessions to preview a few important particulars of each role. Include exercises that allow new employees to describe what the university mission means to them. Ensure each new employee leaves onboarding with calendar appointments for weekly coffee chats for at least three months. These are hypothetical examples, of course. However the recommendation is based on the insights from the actual data from this study.

Third, provide depth on the elements that matter most when onboarding new staff members in the early stages of their career. Specifically, design sessions that describe and explore employee benefits and Employee Resource Groups in detail. Bring guest speakers in live or via technology to share their experiences and recommendations. Walk through exactly how to enroll and make changes to benefits options. Role-play how to use health benefits at a doctor's office, hospital, and pharmacy for the first time. Show the entire agenda of annual programming from the ERGs. Visit the ERG web sites in real time and sign up for newsletters or email lists on the spot. Again, these are general examples. The specific programming should be tailored to the institution and audience, while meeting the objective of addressing opportunities of importance to staff members who are new to being working professionals.

The final recommendation relates to institutional strategy, whereas the previous three are important unit-level tactics. It is not enough to recite the cliché that an organization's most valuable resource is its people. Even if true, on university campuses with wide ranges of stakeholders it might be worth asking, "Which people?" Through the literature review it was shown that faculty are often considered to be valued on university campuses (Ayo, 2021;

Selingo, 2020). In this study the data provides evidence that students are considered to be valued as stakeholders as well. But what about the professionals who are charged with delivering some of the most important programming impacting college student success and completion? Should they be included as valuable internal resources? If so, then there should be investments to ensure institutions are organized to leverage those resources and compete more effectively. That means investing in best-in-class onboarding and talent management strategies that are inclusive of this level of professional staff. It means prioritizing staff engagement and retention by emphasizing development programs. It means investing in career pathways that lead to senior leadership positions. It means an approach to staff talent management that is represented among the highest institutional priorities. Yes, it begins with implementing a research-based model of onboarding new professional staff members. But leaders can go further by applying the Resource Based View to campus professional staff.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study was restricted to the perspectives of members of the Campus Life division of a mid-sized private university. Of particular interest was the importance of staff members who are responsible for implementing programs related to student success. Those staff members are not limited to the Campus Life unit. Future research should explore the experiences of student-facing staff in units across campuses, including various academic units. Several benefits may result, including embedded best practices that might be shared across a university or more broadly. Conversely, if similar challenges are discovered, more attention may be drawn to the scale of the problem.

Another recommendation for future research is to investigate the relationship between the effectiveness of student success programs and the retention of staff responsible for those programs on a different campus, especially one with below average graduation rates. The university at the center of this case study is well known to have above average graduation rates. It would be interesting to investigate the question of whether institutions with below average persistence and graduation rates also have staff members who are working with students for shorter durations, or if no relationship exits at all. Much attention has been given to the importance of such programs to student success (Light, 2004; Wolniak, Flores, et al., 2016). Similarly, specific types of programs that result in specific success metrics are being defined more clearly by higher education scholars (Wolniak, Wells, et al., 2016). However, a contribution to the literature on student success programs might be additive if it focused on the details of program implementation including staff dynamics such as job embeddedness and retention.

An insight from this study that could lead to future research was the enthusiasm with which interviewees discussed Employee Resource Groups (ERGs) on campus. Analysis of the data from this study reveals a strong affinity for these groups, and the power of ERGs to engender commitment and a sense of belonging powerful enough to prevent some from leaving the university. Future studies could examine the specific effect of ERGs on university campuses on staff engagement and retention. Whether on one campus or across campuses, this could be a fruitful research direction.

An additional area for potential future exploration was illuminated by the experiences described by the interviewee in this study who had resigned from their role at the university. In this study, this subject was the lone exception. However, their insights from their experiences were remarkable. Future research could focus on former staff members who recently resigned. Their reasons for resigning could be explored with the objective of improving future retention by adjusting institutional behavior that precipitated the resignations. This research might build on the work of Curran and Prottas (2017) to further define specific role stressors among higher education professional staff and point towards potential mitigation strategies.

Conclusion

This study highlighted the onboarding experiences of professional staff members across three teams within the campus life unit of a mid-sized private university. Those experiences, as well as a sample of related university documents, generated strong evidence that institutional onboarding efforts are most closely aligned with compliance related activities that typically define orientations. This illuminated a wide area of opportunity for the institution to direct its efforts towards a strategic talent management approach. Professional staff in this study benefit from outstanding supervisors who bridge the gap between institutional onboarding activities and best-practice. Specific opportunities for improvement of the experiences of newly hired campus life staff include a greater emphasis on the establishment of benefits and early introduction to Employee Resource Groups. A strategic approach to talent management could be an important step for universities to become able to leverage their valuable internal resource, professional staff talent, as a sustainable competitive advantage in a challenging higher education environment.

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Appendix A

Interview Guide for Student-Facing Professional Staff

Introduction

Hello. Thank you for taking time to meet with me today. I know the work you do is very important, and I appreciate your effort to participate in this discussion. I expect this to take about one hour. Is it okay with you if I record our conversation so I can review it for accuracy later?

Introduce myself, my history and role, and my doctoral project researching how universities manage professional staff talent.

Interviewee Background:

- Tell me about yourself and how you came to join the university community (probes: How long have you been with the institution?)
- What was it about this job that made you want to apply for this job? What made you accept the offer? (probes: Were you specifically interested in working in higher education?)
- What are your long-term career goals? (probes: Do you intend to stay at the university?)

General Onboarding:

- When you first joined the university, what do you remember about your onboarding experience?
    - How were the objectives described to you, in terms of the university and/or your specific role?
    - How long was the onboarding process? (probes: Did you feel it was sufficient? How so? Or, why not?)
    - What, if anything, did you learn about the university's history, culture and values?
    - How did the onboarding experience, in particular, make you feel as a new member of the community?
    - Thinking back to your onboarding experience, what are three words to describe it?

The Four C's and Onboarding Best Practices, Bauer (2010)

- During your onboarding experience, what are your reflections on what you learned about each of the following as they related to your new job (probe for details on each):
  - Basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations
  - An understanding of your new job and all related expectations
  - A sense of formal and informal norms of the university, for example what faculty members do, etc.
  - How to begin establishing interpersonal relationships and information networks within the university to help with a sense of belonging
- Following the onboarding process, can you tell me about how your manager or HR representatives worked with you to check on your progress leading up to important milestones (such as 30, 60, 90 and 120 days on the job (up to one year)?
- Either during onboarding or after, what advice have you received about how to be successful as a staff member?
    - Gather information.
    - Manage first impressions.
    - Invest in relationship development.
    - Seek feedback.
    - Show success early on.

Closing

Is there anything else you would like to add about your experience onboarding as a new staff member that we did not have a chance to discuss during the interview?

I would like to reassure you that confidentiality will be maintained through all stages of the project.

Thank you again for participating. Do you have any particular questions for me at this time?

If you happen to think of any questions after you leave here today, please do not hesitate to call or email (my information is listed on the consent form).

Appendix B

Institutional Review Board (IRB) Approval

Study Approved

IRB@uga.edu
To Brian Mitchell; Amy Stich

If there are problems with how this message is displayed, click here to view it in a web browser.
Click here to download pictures. To help protect your privacy, Outlook prevented automatic download of some pictures in this message.

Notification of Approval

To:	Brian Mitchell
Link:	PROJECT00007445
P.I.:	Amy Stich
Title:	HOW DOES HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGE NON-FACULTY PROFESSIONAL STAFF TALENT? A CASE STUDY
ACTIONS TO TAKE:	This submission has been approved. You can access the correspondence letter using the following link: Correspondence_for_PROJECT00007445.pdf(0.01) To review additional details, click the link above to access the project workspace. For Non-Exempt research and if required, date-stamped consent documents can be found in the Documents section under "Final" in PDF form.

Please take our survey on your submission experience. Your feedback is very important.
https://ugeorgia.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_3C0bBlC1UVQxiyF