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Student Support Professionals Experience Onboarding

by

Stacy Frost

A Dissertation

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of

St. Cloud State University

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

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Abstract

This study was designed to explore the onboarding experience of student support professionals in Midwestern universities within a state system. The 4 C's of onboarding (Bauer, 2010), specifically the building blocks of culture and connection, were used as a guide through the qualitative research design. The study offers insight into the socialization process, the broadest description of the relationship between the organization and the employee, and dives deeper into understanding how student support professionals make sense of the onboarding process in understanding the organizational norms, both formal and informal, and establish vital interpersonal relationships and information networks as newcomers.

Dedication

The journey of pursuing a doctoral degree is dedicated to my two grandmothers. Each of them played a unique, symbolic role as I studied higher education administration. One, with an 8th grade education, and the other, a teacher in a one-room schoolhouse. I am grateful for them and the strength they exemplified in their own journeys.

Acknowledgements

Education has played a major role in my life, personally and professionally. My parents have encouraged me through five decades of learning. Through education, I have met my closest friends and found a career that I love, focused on building relationships, to provide support and hope for students. The journey through doctoral coursework and writing has provided me with a deeper understanding of myself, my purpose, and my priorities.

I would like to thank those who have given me the support necessary to pursue a doctoral degree. I am most thankful to my husband, Neil, and my sons, Landon, and Salem, for their constant encouragement. My goal has always been for you to see me graduate. Colleen Kaiminaauao, mahalo. Thank you for journeying with me all these years. Your friendship is a gift. Thank you to all, near and far, for your constant encouragement. It kept me going.

My deepest thanks to my committee chair, Dr. Michael Mills, who never gave up on me. Our conversations were impactful. I wish you the very best in your retirement. Thanks also to Dr. Nancy Mills for your feedback and suggestions. You motivated me when you spoke to our cohort about your dissertation process and how you balanced your work, family and writing. Dr. Steven McCullar, thank you for the lively student support discussions which opened my eyes and influenced my work. Thanks also to Dr. Emeka Ikegwonu for supporting my research. This research is a culmination of many experiences, hours of coursework, conversation, reading and writing, and continuous processing. I am grateful for the participants who shared their time and experiences. Finally, I am grateful for the overall commitment to the research and to one another, as higher education professionals.

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New job transitions occur 12 times in a person's lifetime which means 12 opportunities for a person to make connections with new colleagues and learn the culture of the organization (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012). The transition into a new institution and role can be challenging (Schlossberg et al., 1995). Similar to students, student support professionals may arrive at the institution with varying levels of uncertainty, unease, and curiosity (Dean et al., 2011). A cursory attempt at onboarding new employees may make for an unsuccessful transition. This points to a constructive discussion within student support professionals regarding their onboarding experiences during these job transitions.

Making connections and understanding the institutional culture are as important for student support professionals as they are for students. Ironically, what we do for students, we do not do for professionals. Efforts to recruit and retain students, and encourage growth and learning, do not match the efforts to recruit and retain student support professionals, and encourage their growth and learning. Establishing information networks and professional relationships is part of an effective onboarding experience (Bauer, 2010). Learning about the institution's culture is equally important. Kuh and Hall (1993) defined culture as:

[The] collective, mutually shaping patterns of institutional history, mission, physical settings, norms, traditions, values, practices, beliefs and assumptions which guide behavior of individuals and groups ... and which provide frames of reference for interpreting the meanings of events and actions on and off campus (p. 2).

Understanding the institution's history is an important part of the employee's transition into the culture of the institution (Bauer, 2010).

Student support professionals' commitment to helping students connect to one another and to the institution, through orientation, can be applied to connecting student support professionals to one another and to the institution (Dean et al., 2011). Ellingson and Snyder, 2015, as cited in, Amey and Reesor, 2015) pointed out "This is the nature of student support: to learn and grow in our work so that the students we serve receive the benefit. With this common goal, we are all destined for success" (p. 16). New student support professionals may be more successful and stay longer if they develop connections through intentional relationship building throughout the institution (Reesor et al., 2015). The newcomers "need to be well trained ... and also need to be acclimated to the community college itself" (Watts & Hammons, 2002a). The opportunity to make professional connections is an important component of the onboarding experience.

The newcomer's experience can be intimidating. The idea of doing great work while learning responsibilities and fitting in with colleagues is overwhelming. Collins (2001) pointed out organizations should begin with "who" rather than "what" in order to better adapt to changes. Collins shares the steps in taking a company from good to great. The first step is to "get the right people on the bus, and the wrong people off the bus, then we'll figure out how to take it someplace great" (Collins, 2001, p. 41). This idea applies to recruiting, training and development, and retention. If the newcomer is engaged with organizational members, organizational change is much more achievable. Motivating and managing is much less of a problem. Great organizational vision with the wrong people does not work. Organizations need to find the right people for the positions they have, provide them with the proper training, and then offer opportunities for continued growth to retain them. The right people are the organization's greatest asset (Collins, 2001). The new employee should network with new

colleagues, gather information, and learn the culture within the first 90 days on the job (Forbes 3 Coaches Council, 2019). “An effective onboarding process enables new team members to gain access to information, tools and materials needed to perform their function more quickly” (Snell, 2006, p. 32). It is worth considering how intentional onboarding experiences in student support could translate to positive transitions for new employees.

This research focused on how student support professionals experience onboarding. The four specific levels or building blocks of onboarding are the Four C’s (Bauer, 2010), which come from the Society of Human Resources Management (SHRM), the world’s largest human resource membership association:

Compliance: teaching employees basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations

Clarification: ensuring employees understand their new jobs and all related

expectations Culture: providing employee with a sense of formal and informal

organizational norms Connection: the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks new employees must establish.

While there have been other studies about employee orientation, none have been focused on the specific onboarding aspects of culture and connection within higher education. While compliance and clarification seem standard, connection and culture might not be discussed as often. Onboarding may be an organic process at the institution, left to individual and existing employees to work through together without assistance from the institution. Or, onboarding may be an organizational priority, an intentional strategic process, which includes the Four C’s (Bauer, 2010). This study offers insight into the onboarding experiences of student support professionals.

Statement of the Problem

New employee orientation has been insufficient within student support (Carpenter, 2001; Winston & Creamer, 1997). Areas with little emphasis include institutional expectations, staff development policies, and resources (Winston & Creamer, 1997). Massaro (2014) highlighted a simple orientation is not adequate for a successful start in the organization. Taken a step further, orientation is insufficient to achieve onboarding. Onboarding is a process that occurs over an expanded timeframe in order for the employee to learn about the organization. It is also a process of finding clarity and understanding of one's role among constituents.

Orientation and onboarding are very different. Orientation is a single informational event that is a one-way information share, through formal training sessions covering policies and procedures (Saunders & Cooper, 2009). "Orientation programs are a form of employee training designed to introduce new employees to their job, the people they will be working with, and the larger organization" (Klein & Weaver, 2000, p. 48). Onboarding suggests a broader, more comprehensive process that includes "formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment" (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 268).

Newcomer connections and organizational culture are key components in understanding the onboarding experience of student support practitioners. Current research does not go far enough into the culture and connection aspects of onboarding student support professionals. Massaro's (2014) contribution to this topic includes three focus areas of onboarding: building relationships, understanding culture, and achieving results. What is known is that student support professionals establish a professional identity through

connections with colleagues (Amey & Reesor et al., 2015. McClelland's (1961) theory of needs includes a primary need of affiliation, which reinforces the desire for connections and professional companionship as newcomers. Dufour and Eaker (1998) found: 5

The structure of an organization is founded upon its policies, procedures, rules and relationships. The culture of an organization is founded upon the assumptions, beliefs, values, and habits that constitute the norms for that organization – norms that shape how its people think, feel, and act. (p. 131)

There has been little research focused on the onboarding experience of student support professionals. While there is research regarding newcomer experiences (Renn & Hodges, 2007), and finding place and purpose (Mitchell, 2012), much of it simply describes the lack of investment in employees (Renn & Hodges, 2007) and an assumption that the student support professional “brings the cupcakes to meetings” (Mitchell, 2012, p. xii). Mitchell's (2012) reference is an external assumption that student support professionals carry out tasks considered peripheral in comparison to other university units. As more student support professionals are being tapped to become college presidents, he believed, “the field of student support administration as a whole, is at a transition phase where it too is experimenting with an emerging identity.”

This is an important connection to onboarding. Introducing a newcomer to the institution where an onboarding experience for student support professionals is impeded by a lack of overall understanding of the profession significantly impacts newcomer self-perception. Because so much of the literature on onboarding is conceptual in nature, rather than founded on empirical data, this qualitative study helps to fill a gap in student support literature regarding the onboarding experience of student support professionals. The scope of this research was on

the onboarding experience of student support professionals, specifically their experience of the 6 connection and culture components. It is integral to know what is occurring and how student support professionals are experiencing onboarding.

Description and Scope of the Research

Through a qualitative study, I investigated how student support professionals experience onboarding. This study specifically investigated whether or not newcomers to the institution experience the Four C's of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010). I particularly sought to learn what type of connections were being made and how the culture of the institution was being shared and understood. I collected and analyzed newcomers' experiences in order to understand their expectations; how they learn about the institutional culture, support systems, and decision-making; and how connections occur within and beyond the new employees' office. The study gathered employees' reflections on the onboarding experience to better understand how the employees experienced onboarding.

This study was based on several continual, or spiraling, frameworks and processes within higher education that further relate to onboarding: student support, human resources, socialization, and sensemaking. Human resources involve a process of connections between the individual and the organization. Understanding the onboarding experience contributes to human resource practices in higher education by bringing evidence and theory to student support practitioners and beyond. Socialization is a process of developing belonging to an organization. Sensemaking is the process of constructing meaning of one's experience.

Strategic human resource objectives point to onboarding as a strategic process, rather than a transaction (Snell, 2006). Socialization is a learning process in which organizational

membership is acquired through the gathering of information and behaviors (Fisher, 1986).

Frear (2007) defined the onboarding process as a “holistic approach combining people, process and technology to optimize the impact a new hire has on the organization with an emphasis on both effectiveness and efficiency” (p. 4). No matter the position level at the institution, the goal is building relationships with lasting scholarly and professional implications for students (Mertz, 2015; Mitchell, 2012). This goal should be the same for student support professionals.

While the terms orientation, socialization, and onboarding are used frequently, it is important to note the difference between the terms. The largest differences lie between orientation and onboarding. In Table 1, Massaro (2014) stated specific differences between orientation and onboarding.

Table 1

Orientation v. Onboarding

| Orientation | Onboarding |
|--|---|
| Learning the written rules | Learning the written and unwritten rules |
| An event | A process |
| Lasts the first month (at most) | May last a full year |
| Focus is on integration to the unit and the specific job | Multi-level focus: organization, unit, individual |
| Linear | Non-linear and non-sequential |
| Builds on past successes | Includes reflection and unlearning past successes |

Orientation may be limited to paperwork, policies, and payroll (Caruth et al., 2010). Onboarding refers to “efforts by the organization to facilitate socialization” (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 2). Socialization is a continual process by which employees are introduced to a company’s culture and begin to feel a sense of belonging to the organization (Van Maanen &

Schein, 1979). Onboarding is when a newcomer moves from being an outsider to being an insider (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011). Klein and Weaver (2000) shared, “both formal and informal orientations are important for effective socialization and employees need to be oriented to both their jobs and the broader organization” (p. 48). Although onboarding may be mistakenly defined as “being in a room for three days listening to boring lectures” (Williams, 2009, p. 15) the idea is to move beyond the Four C’s of compliance and clarification and into an intentional experience of culture and connection (Bauer, 2010). 8

Organizational socialization describes the process as the newcomer experiences the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills of the organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). The ability to reflect on these experiences while gathering critical information is a necessary skill as a newcomer and student support professional (Dalpes & Sanchez, 2015). Newcomers must learn to understand and make sense of their surroundings (Louis, 1980). Sensemaking is the conceptual framework that connects the socialization and onboarding frameworks.

The literature review will utilize these terms and concepts, include cycles in the present field, existing data, and general onboarding examples in business and in higher education. The conceptual frameworks of human resources, socialization, onboarding, and sensemaking will be considered through the literature review in the next chapter. This study will focus on how employees experience onboarding through connection, which is “the vital interpersonal relationship and information networks that new employees must establish” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011, p. 2), and through culture, which is the organization’s formal and informal norms (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

Research Questions

The following questions guided this study:

1. How do student support professionals experience onboarding?
2. How do student support professionals make connections through the onboarding process?
3. How do student support professionals understand the culture of the institution through the onboarding process?

Purpose and Significance of the Study

This study aimed to understand how student support professionals experience onboarding and whether or not the onboarding building blocks of culture and connection are occurring. The purpose was to find out what is happening through qualitative data. Learning more about the onboarding experience of student support professionals may help identify why newcomers decide to leave or to stay. This understanding could point to further conversation around employee retention. Gilmore and Turner (2010) believed explaining the culture of the organization creates a more transparent exchange with the newcomer. A more expansive onboarding experience could include introductions to peers and key stakeholders. The study investigated the onboarding experience and how we might build upon it.

These newcomers are “New employees who are undergoing the socialization process” (Bauer, 2004, p. 743). The definition of a newcomer is traditionally the person most recently hired in the organization. This study identified a newcomer as new to the institution, having been a member for less than one year. In contrast, insiders are “Organizational members who are already established in the organization when new employees join” (Bauer, 2004, p. 743).

While student support professionals focus on the transition of students (Dean et al., 2011), there is a lack of research focused on the onboarding experience of student support professionals. Ironically, job descriptions of student support professionals now include human

resource aspects, including personal support and professional development (Tull & Kuk, 2012). 10

To eliminate growing attrition and burnout in student support, intentional networking, orientation, and training are helpful with newcomer transition. Crume (2012) emphasized the importance of student support professionals focused on human resources, staff development and networking, as culture develops within their institutions and more broadly within higher education. This ripple effect points to an “intentionally managed transition that benefits new professionals will, in turn, benefit students as well” (Dean et al., 2011, p. 148).

Assumptions of the Study

The first assumption of the study was that participants would be truthful and answer the interview questions to the best of their ability and memory. A second assumption was that we cannot claim representativeness given the sample sizes and purposive sampling we use. While the experiences of the participants in this study cannot be applied to all student support professionals, the qualitative method ultimately depended upon the ability of the reader to make a connection and the interpretation of the reader to make a generalization from the research. The generalizability refers to the findings of this study and how they might apply to the broader concept of onboarding experiences in higher education.

Delimitations/Positioning Statement

This study examined the onboarding experience of student support professionals. I shared my lived connections to onboarding, pre-judgments and expectations about the study, and expected results. There are topics relevant to the onboarding experience that were not addressed in this study. This was not a study of human resource offices on campuses, nor was it a study focused on employee self-efficacy during socialization.

The topic of onboarding has been of interest to me for well over two decades. My interest

in the topic of onboarding is twofold. First, interest comes from my own experience as a newcomer to a higher education institution. Second, interest comes from my professional role on campus. Due to a lack of an onboarding experience in my higher education career, I was extremely interested in learning how student support professionals experience onboarding.

The biases I brought to the study come from my strong onboarding experiences in the hospitality industry, prior to entering a career in higher education. In 25 years of professional work and 14 job transitions, I have had 14 opportunities to experience onboarding. The most thorough of my onboarding experiences came from the hospitality industry in the mid-1990s. My onboarding experiences included an on-going, intentional strategy, through companies such as Marriott, Radisson, and Holiday Inn. These experiences stand in stark contrast to my entry into higher education, which had no onboarding process. I arrived at campus, signed my paperwork, read through campus policies, ate lunch with a handful of other new employees, and went to my office. My peers in higher education share similar stories.

In my professional role on campus as a development officer, I build networks and connect individuals, both on and off campus, with the university and resources from university constituents. This means I personally invest in newcomers. I introduce myself to them and share my role on campus, as an employee, alum, and colleague. This provides an opportunity to answer questions and share my knowledge of the campus and community. My role is very specific to the aspects of building campus connections and sharing the institutional culture.

My point of view, going into the study, is that higher education is lacking in providing an intentional onboarding experience for newcomers. I expect others to have only an orientation experience, not a full onboarding experience. In the hospitality industry, I grew to expect onboarding as an ongoing process. To be fair, my on-campus employment as an undergraduate

had onboarding components worth mentioning.

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Although the term onboarding did not exist in the late 1990s, as an undergraduate resident assistant for two years, my experience was a yearlong immersion in the campus community and culture. Each year, the experience created a deep sense of commitment and belonging to the unit and to the institution. Our yearlong training included topics such as diversity, conflict resolution, team building, problem solving, self-evaluation, and staff development. It also created an onboarding expectation for professional positions after college. As an undergraduate, I observed turnover in student support. Resident assistants would either burn out or take other jobs. Residence hall directors stayed one or two years at most. Nearly three decades later, I continue to observe turnover within student support at my institution. This turnover is normal when employee onboarding does not exist. It may be normal when onboarding does exist. My point of view, specific to the onboarding experience since being a resident assistant in the late 1990s, has changed over the years.

Summary

Higher education institutions welcome new student support professionals in a variety of ways. This qualitative study helps to fill the gap in research around how these professionals experience onboarding. The onboarding process extends far beyond the paperwork and policies of the institution. It is an investment in the individual and the organization at the same time. The study also helps higher education professionals understand the importance of connections and culture in shaping the newcomer experience.

This chapter explained the gap in literature regarding onboarding, specific to the building blocks of connection and culture as part of the Four C's of onboarding. The following chapter includes an overview and analysis of literature on onboarding. It includes an examination of

onboarding in business and onboarding in higher education. The conceptual frameworks of human resources, socialization, and sensemaking helped examine onboarding through the Four C's of onboarding and the key areas of culture and connection. In Chapter 3, the methods, data to be collected, analysis, procedures, and timeline are described. Chapter 4 describes my research results in understanding the onboarding experience of student support professionals. Chapter Five includes a discussion of the study, the limitations and implications for theory, implications for practice, and the implications for research. 13

Student support professionals are responsible for the transition of students into the institution. In contrast, the transition experience as professionals into the institution may not be as intentional or thorough. Once hired, the newcomer will experience some form of orientation or onboarding. In order to understand the onboarding experience of student support professionals, this literature review explores the research on issues relative to onboarding experiences. The previous chapter covered the scope of the research, the purpose and significance of the study as it relates to student support, assumptions of the study, and delimitations. This chapter includes a review of the research built upon conceptual frameworks, and studies that informed this research, specific to onboarding. This study was an exploration of how student support professionals experience onboarding. The critical topics that help to further understand the onboarding experience include: the relationship between the employee and the organization, the organizational entry process and a sense of belonging within the organization, and how the newcomer makes sense of the onboarding experience. These topics situate within three conceptual frameworks: socialization, sensemaking, and onboarding. These frameworks each contain various processes which spiral within one another.

Socialization helps to further examine the relationship between the employee and the organization. The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) describes socialization as the broadest description of the relationship between the organization and the newcomer. Moving from an organizational outsider to an organizational insider (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011) through socialization relates to newcomer effectiveness, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Bauer et al., 2007). The three stages of socialization in this study are: anticipation (expectation), encounter (knowledge), and settling in (belonging).

examine how the individual interprets and makes meaning from the onboarding experience. This is done through inputs: others' interpretations, local interpretation schemes, predispositions and purposes, and past experiences (Louis, 1980). These inputs are described broadly through the following tenets: sensemaking as a process, sensemaking through storytelling, and sensemaking through sensegiving. As newcomers make sense of the experience and begin to become a part of the organization, the spiral of processes returns back to the human resources focus on human capital and the systems in place.

The final framework, and the basis of this study, is onboarding. A thorough onboarding program focuses on four key components, or building blocks, known as the Four C's: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010). The Four C's are experienced in different ways throughout an employee's entry into the institution. The Four C's are illustrated as they relate to each dimension of onboarding. This study took a closer look at the onboarding experience, relative to the building blocks of culture and connection. This literature review also includes the benefits and challenges with onboarding, who is responsible, when it occurs, how it is practiced and when it is practiced.

Review of the Research on Issues Relevant to the Study

This study aimed to learn how student support professionals experience onboarding through application of three conceptual frameworks: socialization, sensemaking, and onboarding. The literature review begins with a broad description of human resources in student support and the relationship between the employee and the organization. The framework of socialization focuses on the newcomer's expectations and a sense of belonging. The sensemaking framework helped in understanding how the newcomer describes the onboarding experience through

reflection. Finally, the study was based on the central conceptual framework of onboarding. 16

Human Resources

Human resources served as a general frame or perspective on organizations for this study. The human resource frame, described by Bolman and Deal (2008) is “centered on the needs, skills and participation of an organization’s membership” (Crume, 2012, p. 137, as cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012). Onboarding is a more specific framework within the human resources perspective (Bolman & Deal, 2013). Initially studied under the category of socialization, “onboarding has been considered a minor part of human resource management” (Bauer, 2010, p. 8). Onboarding has since been recognized by those in higher education, and those who facilitate onboarding, as based on solid research and best practice (Bauer, 2010, p. 8). Successful onboarding is the result of human resources structured in a way that supports new employees from the beginning by sharing the organization’s culture and values, goals and history, and power structure (Klein & Weaver, 2000).

Human resources represent the relationship between the employee and the organization. This relationship is key to understanding the culture and connection building blocks of onboarding. Human resources refer to the organization’s human capital and the organization’s systems, such as human resource policies and practices, which serve to support the development of human capital (Walsh et al., 2010). Human resources in higher education mirror human resources in business (Crume, 2012 as cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012, p. 85). Onboarding examples in business and in higher education are provided later in the chapter.

Human resources are linked to tenets of onboarding and socialization, such as setting expectations, passing on knowledge, and experiencing a sense of belonging. Historically, the role of human resources was as “communicator between employees and employers” (Crume, 2012 as

cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012, p. 91). Human resources have expanded responsibilities for professional development now included in some student support job descriptions (Crume, 2012 as cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012, p. 86). As the role of human resources expands, “staff development and human relations will continue to be at the forefront of organizational culture within higher education” (Crume, 2012 as cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012). Student support professionals are responsible for building effective teams by “bringing out the best in the people who work for the organization” (Bailey & Hamilton, 2015). While newcomers are independent actors, they are in a constant relationship with others.

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Three human resources tenets are key to understanding the onboarding experience: needs, strategies and relationships. The needs and relationships focus on the human capital aspect of human resources, while best practices relate to the strategies with the human resource systems. Matching the needs of the organization with the needs of the employee is an investment in human capital (Kaufman, 1981). “Good training and development programs take into consideration the needs of the organization and the needs of the individual” (Bailey & Hamilton, 2015 as cited in Amey & Reesor, 2015). Beginning with recruitment, the organization needs employees with “energy, effort and talent” (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 135). At the same time, the employee needs to believe the organization will meet the employee’s needs. The needs of the individual and the needs of the organization should align and, when they do, the talent and energy of the employee is engaged within the organization.

The second tenet of human resources is strategy; an organization’s systems, policies, and/or practices; which serve to support the development of human capital (Walsh et al., 2010). The formal or informal onboarding practices can be considered human resource strategies in developing human capital. A passive onboarding strategy (Bauer, 2010) is common across higher

education. Compliance occurs and some clarification may occur, but neither connection or culture are guided formally. While there are a range of approaches to welcoming and preparing newcomers, Bauer's (2010) Four C's of onboarding are SHRM's recommendation for a formal, proactive onboarding experience.

Relationships, the third tenet of the human resources framework, relates directly to affiliation, one of three primary needs of an individual (McClelland, 1961). This is a desire for human companionship and reassurance. As newcomers look for approval and reassurance, they may conform under pressure by peers. "Both individual satisfaction and organizational effectiveness depend heavily on the quality of interpersonal relationships" (Bolman & Deal, 2013, p. 182). Social intelligence of a newcomer allows for successful interaction with others (Albrecht, 2007) and represents social awareness, including empathy, self-presentation, influence and concern (Goleman, 2005). The newcomers' ability to make connections and build relationships ties directly into the next conceptual framework of socialization.

Conceptual Frameworks

Socialization

The Society for Human Resource Management (Bauer, 2010) describes socialization as the broadest description of the relationship between the organization and the newcomer. Socialization is the process of introducing newcomers to the critical elements of the organization's culture while connecting newcomers to their professional network (Saks & Ashforth, 1997). Socialization is an ongoing sensemaking process as newcomers form professional relationships and learn their organizational role.

Levinson (1978) suggested older insiders might mentor younger new hires, creating a positive experience for the older insiders through their contribution in socialization. Insiders who

socialize newcomers may also increase their knowledge of the organization and their own role. 19

This sensemaking experience occurs when the insider makes meaning out of their experience in order to explain it to another (Louis, 1980; Sutton & Louis, 1987). The ‘people processing strategies’ suggest some socialization practices are more effective than others (Van Maanen, 1990). Van Maanen and Schein (1979) developed six dimensions of organizational socialization. “Organizational socialization is the process by which people ‘learn the ropes’ of a particular organizational role. It can range from a quick trial and error to a long process of education and apprenticeship” (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 211). The six dimensions or tactics include: collective-individual, formal-informal, sequential-random, fixed-variable, serial- disjunctive, and investiture-divestiture. This study will focus on the formal-informal dimension.

Jones (1986) studied the six dimensions (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979) and situated them under institutionalized or individualized tactics. This meant experiencing the organization through a cohort led model versus building relationships individually in a more proactive role as newcomer (Jones, 1986). Jones (1986) found socialization in large groups, such as a large institution welcoming hundreds of newcomers at once might result in less effective newcomer adjustment in comparison to an individualized experience. Jones further simplified Van Maanen and Schein’s (1979) six dimensions to three factors: context, content, and social aspects. Going forward, researchers situated the six dimensions into institutionalized and individualized approaches. Feldman (1994) found four potential positive outcomes for individualized socialization: more positive job attitudes, increased motivation and effort, increased knowledge about the organization, and increased knowledge about the profession.

Three phases of socialization (Noe, 2005) include: anticipation (expectation), encounter (knowledge) and settling in (belonging). The anticipatory stage of socialization includes the

ways newcomers prepare themselves to enter the organization, learn about the work and the organization, and the interaction with the organization (Bauer, 2004). This includes completing paperwork as part of compliance, one of the Four C's of onboarding. The encounter stage is the timeframe when newcomers begin to encounter and learn to deal with the people and the work of doing the job (Bauer, 2004). This socialization stage encompasses the Four C's building block of clarification. The final stage, settling in, is sometimes referred to as "role management," as newcomers master the social and task-related aspects of the job (Bauer, 2004). This aspect of socialization includes the Four C's (Bauer, 2010) building blocks of connection and culture.

Organizations may have both formal and informal socialization experiences. Formal socialization refers to newcomers who are isolated from other organizational members while they learn their roles, while informal refers to newcomers becoming part of work groups immediately upon occupying their new positions and learn on-the-job (Gruman et al., 2006). Beyond an interaction between the new employee and the organization, socialization is an unwritten social contract. In order to develop and maintain these social contracts, the organization can provide realistic job previews; the organization can also provide systems which "reward supportive behaviors such as mentoring, teamwork, and the provision of social rapport" (Gruman et al., 2006, p. 68). Finally, the organization can facilitate increased newcomer and insider interaction (Reichers, 1987), such as a formal mentorship process. The underlying message is secure relationships between newcomers and insiders are essential and are the responsibility of both.

Behaviors of newcomers and organizational insiders must be considered in understanding newcomer accommodation during socialization (Reicher, 1987). Bauer and Green (1998) studied the role of the manager throughout the newcomer adjustment process.

Through a three-wave data collection, they tested a proposed model of newcomer socialization 21 with 205 newcomers, 364 co-workers, and 112 managers. The study focused on two approaches to newcomer acquisition of knowledge: information-seeking newcomer behavior and the manager behavior toward a newcomer (Bauer & Green, 1998). The study used Morrison's (1993a) task-oriented behaviors to task accommodation and socially oriented behaviors to social accommodation. Three salient socialization outcomes were used: performance, job satisfaction, and organizational commitment (Adkins, 1995). They found manager behavior to be a "key aspect of the newcomer socialization process" (Bauer & Green, 1998, p. 81). Newcomers reported managers who went beyond the clarification steps and showed relationship-oriented behavior in making connection were associated with success.

Different socialization behaviors led to different socialization outcomes. The task-oriented behaviors of task accommodation led to role clarity and performance efficacy, with an overarching outcome of improved performance. Socially oriented behaviors of social accommodation led to outcomes of job satisfaction and organizational commitment. The reflective influence that occurred between the newcomer and the manager was influential in the socialization process. The study was three separate snapshots, rather than a continuous study, which meant socialization, newcomer performance, and manager behavior were "reflexive in nature, each influencing the other over time" (Bauer & Green, 1998, p. 82). Manager behavior is key in understanding newcomer adjustment through socialization.

Onboarding is another key consideration of the socialization process. Klein & Heuser, 2008 found onboarding can expedite socialization. They defined onboarding as "formal and informal practices, programs, and policies enacted or engaged in by an organization or its agents to facilitate newcomer adjustment" (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 268). The study aimed to better

understand onboarding practices through surveys completed by 10 HR managers about

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onboarding in their organization. They were asked for permission to survey new employees hired within the past two years. The goal was to understand how onboarding had assisted in the new employees' socialization process and to understand onboarding practices.

The study responded to a gap in research around onboarding practices that facilitate the newcomer adjustment. Klein and Heuser (2008) provided a framework, called the Inform-Welcome-Guide (IWG) framework to study new employee socialization practices and concluded three purposes of onboarding practices: inform the newcomer, welcome the newcomer, and guide the newcomer. The framework was meant to apply to all organizations, even though higher education was not included in this particular study.

The study addressed the effectiveness of specific onboarding practices in order to shed light on how and when the practices could be offered, how newcomers perceived those practices and the connection between the practices and newcomer socialization. There were three overall findings. First, there were discrepancies between what the organization reported and what the employee experienced. The employees experienced onboarding practices at a lower rate than the organizations reported offering them. Second, "The number of practices offered (or experienced) was positively related to newcomers being socialized" (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 279). The quality of the newcomer's experience was measured for all five IWG categories. Newcomers viewed required practices as more helpful and related to formal socialization. "All five IWG categories were more likely to be experienced formally than informally (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 279). Timing of onboarding practices may "depend on the needs of the new employee, the specific practice, and how many practices are being offered" (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 279). Significant relationships did not occur in the earliest days of onboarding. An effective

onboarding program which offered more practices helped facilitate socialization. The third finding was that the onboarding method matters (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 2). The

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five IWG categories were more likely to be experienced formally than informally.

Newcomers viewed practices as more helpful when they were required (as opposed to encouraged) and the extent to which practices were required was significantly related to the extent newcomers were socialized for all five categories and for all 10 most commonly offered specific practices (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 279).

The goal of socialization is for a positive process that leads to positive relationships. These relationships, specifically those between the organization and the employee, are the focus of human resources. Socialization represents the broadest relationship between the organization and the employee, as well as the sense-making process in which newcomers form work relationships and find their place in the organization. Formal orientation programs, an important part of onboarding, are part of the socialization process.

Sensemaking

While the conceptual frameworks of socialization and onboarding are crucial in researching how student support professionals experience onboarding, they are not enough. An additional conceptual framework, sensemaking, must be involved to truly understand the experience. Sensemaking is “the process through which people work to understand issues or events that are novel, ambiguous, confusing, or in some other way violate expectations” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014).

The earliest sensemaking literature (Dewey, 1933; James, 1890) evolved from a study of every day practices of actors and how sense was made of speech (Polanyi, 1967). Studies next evolved to how actors make sense of their lived experience (Cicourel, 1974; Heap, 1976).

Research in the 1980s connected the cognitive to sensemaking including violated expectations, 24 and interpretations of the environment (Kiesler & Sproull, 1982). This led to a focus on actions taken as people made sense of the environment. The next phase of sensemaking literature focused on linkages between sensemaking and organizational outcomes such as: strategic change (Barr, 1998; Gioia & Chitipeddi, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Thomas et al., 1993), learning culture (Drazin et al., 1999), and social influence (Ibarra & Andrews, 1993).

Sensemaking is at the core of the onboarding experience as “all levels of the organization are significant in producing (or inhibiting) change” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 90). Through sensemaking, newcomers learn at all levels “by enabling people to better understand themselves, their situation, and how to make sense in the future” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 92). As the newcomer brings individual skill and knowledge and past experiences to the organization, the learning that takes place through onboarding is an ongoing opportunity for newcomers to further understand the culture and the connections being made in their new organization.

Sensemaking is a fluid, on-going process (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Thayer, 1988). The newcomer attempts to make sense of past experiences alongside new experiences at the new institution. Sensemaking is “retrospective as members look back on events and construct their meanings” (Seeger et al., 2003, p. 22). As questions are being answered, sensemaking starts all over again. Answers will be “reaccomplished, retuned, and sometimes even rebuilt. What the answers never have is a sense of finality” (Weick, 1979, p. 77). Due to the spiraling continuum of processes, the relationship aspect of sensemaking is critical in the interpretation of the culture and connections, through storytelling and relationships. The only thing people have for perceiving and knowing the world is their past experience of it. As they encounter new

perceptions, like membership in a new organization, they must add to their store of knowledge 25 with the social constructions in their new circumstances. Those new constructions are always open to change and development, thus allowing a new person to potentially begin to think and act more like the other people in their new organization.

Louis (1980) posited these new constructions that occur through constant encounters with differences in the new job setting exemplify sensemaking through socialization. Major differences are the physical surroundings, while more subtle differences occur when new experiences challenge assumption based on past-experiences and perceptions. Using Louis' (1980) socialization process as "an encounter with differences as its starting point" (Oud, 2008, p. 253). Oud (2008) conducted a two-stage study of new librarians and their experience in adjusting to the workplace. Oud focused on the newcomers' transitions into Canadian university libraries to uncover the surprises, or new constructions, and differences from their pre-existing expectations about the new job. The study was conducted in order to develop more effective training and orientation programs. Through semi-structured exploratory interviews with six newcomers, and later a questionnaire on initial job experiences created for broader distribution, findings revealed gaps in pre-existing knowledge and aspects of the job which differed from librarians' initial expectations (Oud, 2008). The study confirmed the benefit of assisting newcomers in the adjustment to the organization through a formal structured approach. Understanding the on-going social constructions made by newcomers is important in designing onboarding processes that facilitate positive newcomer transitions. Oud (2008) further recommended mentorship programs and regular meetings with supervisors or peers as opportunities for newcomers to ask questions throughout the adjustment process. The sensemaking framework is reviewed through four lenses: sensemaking through socialization,

sensemaking as a process, sensemaking through storytelling, and sensemaking through sensegiving.

Sensemaking Through Socialization

Socialization, onboarding and sensemaking are all social processes. The sensemaking process of newcomers learning how to make sense of their surroundings is called organizational socialization (Louis, 1980). Weick's sensemaking theory helps to define onboarding as joining an on-going conversation. This spiraling process of experiences includes question, negotiation, justification, and rationalization (Weick, 1979). Organizational socialization is the process of individuals experiencing the attitudes, behaviors, knowledge, and skills as part of the organization (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Connections and culture, two of the building blocks of onboarding, are immersed in the processes of socialization and sensemaking. Sensemaking is grounded in both individual and social activity and is constructive of both culture and commitment. "We are always seeking meaning in what we do. We find this in small tasks, in large causes, and in our relationships. Whatever the form, the desire to create meaningful lives is an irresistible current in all organizations" (Wheatley & Kellner-Rogers, 1996, p. 92).

Sensemaking as a Process

Sensemaking is an ongoing process where individuals and organizations attempt to develop a deeper understanding of the problems or challenges they are trying to solve (Ancona, 2011; Senge, 1990; Weick, 1995). Weick (1995) wrote the book *Sensemaking in Organizations*, which linked sensemaking to social processes. There are various definitions of sensemaking and argument whether sensemaking takes place within or between individuals (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Newcomers seek meaning in an ongoing process, through the organization's

culture and connections. The newcomer is likely to experience change, contrast, and surprise. 27

Change was said to represent the external, objective differences in moving from one organization to another (e.g., a change in physical location, title, salary; Louis, 1980). Contrast was used to refer to those differences that emerge in the newcomer's perceptual field personally significant, as subjectively experienced characteristics of the new situation. Surprise was used to refer to differences between newcomers' anticipations of and actual experiences in the organization. (Louis, 1980, p. 244). The newcomer copes with the entry experience through special sensemaking needs. The newcomer needs help interpreting events in the new setting, including surprises, and help in appreciating situation-specific interpretations, schemes, or cultural assumptions. Insiders are a potentially rich source of such help (Louis, 1980). Louis (1980) suggested the newcomer's sensemaking can be supplemented by insiders' views. This can increase development of more long-term, self-sufficient functioning. The supplementing will "facilitate accuracy in newcomers' interpretations of their immediate experiences, on the basis of which individuals choose affective and behavioral responses to early experiences on the job and in the organization" (Louis, 1980, p. 248).

Smerek (2013) studied how new college or university presidents made sense of their role and the organization. The study included interviews with 18 presidents who had been appointed less than five years earlier. An open-ended, semi-structured interview included an introductory question around the presidential hire (Smerek, 2013). The interview questions were similar to this study's focus in exploring how presidents made sense of their new position. The interview included questions about what they found surprising, puzzling or very challenging in their first years, the barriers to sensemaking and their reaction to a published interview with a university president.

Consistently, presidents asked questions in making sense of their experience: What's the story here? What do we do next? And why am I here? Through connecting and listening, the presidents gained an understanding of the institutional culture. The size of the institution was important. Small institutions provided a "core essence" (Smerek, 2013, p. 394) and presidents understood the organization's purpose through more consistent messaging.

The study revealed the institution's part in cognitive restraints on sensemaking (Weber & Glynn, 2006). The presidents sought out 'trusted individuals to help make sense of the organization and to give them more certainty than their judgments' (Smerek, 2013, p. 397). These were often search committee members or organizational insiders. The researcher was keenly aware of the leadership role of the presidents and the two perspectives of the newcomer as either a hero in shaping the organization versus an administrator in an organization with little structure and managerial impact. The researcher found middle ground in interpreting the presidential leaders through a perspective of two theories of how things happen in organizations (Smerek, 2013). The first was an assignment of a major role, in which prominent leaders shape the course of event. The second perspective is one of less significance in administrators with little belief in administrator significance. The study helped to understand the transition process and contribute to the sensemaking process in organizations through the newcomers' experiences. Smerek's (2013) study connects to this onboarding research since student support professionals may have ascribed roles that position them differently within the organization, in more relational, and less administrative or heroic roles.

Organizations use stories to connect people and purpose. This is how the culture of the organization is shared with others, specifically with those new to the organization. Agents within the organization tell the story. “An engaging story recounts what has already happened and also enables us to imagine what is possible—to anticipate future challenges and craft new solutions, and to bring some humanity to work” (Schuyler, 2016). While a good story has a beginning, middle and an end, the purpose is never ending. Sensemaking describes participants beginning to interpret and find a story within the interpretation (Tracy, 2013). Collectively, members of the organization make meaning of the onboarding experience and the organization. A positive exchange and outcome occur when organizations listen to their members’ stories to learn what motivates newcomers and makes them feel their work is meaningful. The organization will strengthen due to the connection points and learning. A collective journey approach allows the employee to learn and make sense as they find meaningful connection between individual work and organizational purpose.

Onboarding is an event, which becomes a trigger for sensemaking (Tracy, 2013). While the new employee is making sense of the onboarding experience, employees within the organization are also making sense of onboarding. To create employee buy-in through sensemaking, the organization must share where it has been, where it is now, and where it is going. Members of the organization make sense of the impact of the onboarding process through stories about new hires, their career journey and how onboarding impacted them. The influence on productivity and decisions to stay or leave the organization are critical pieces of information to share. Sharing stories internally regarding the onboarding process and continuous improvement of the process helps others get excited (Stephenson, 2015). Others will support

onboarding if they are allowed to help shape the story and support onboarding process changes 30 because they recognize a need, or they are part of the process. This leads to the next point, sensemaking through sensegiving.

Sensemaking Through Sensegiving

Past studies point to sensemaking as critical to institutional change (Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006; Schultz & Wehmeier, 2010; Zilber, 2007). While sensemaking “appears influential, it is often not purposive: actors do not act with the intention of changing an institution” (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014, p. 105). There is one exception for those engaged in sensegiving.

Sensegiving means members of the organization are attempting to influence others’ sensemaking about the institution and meaning construction toward a preferred definition of organizational reality (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Newcomers are bound to experience sensegiving alongside sensemaking. This occurs between managers and newcomers or any insider with intention to persuade and convince. Connections in the institution can lead to a culture share through storytelling that impacts the newcomer, due to sensegiving.

Sensemaking is about plausibility, coherence, and reasonableness. Sensemaking is about accounts that are socially acceptable and credible (Weick, 1995). The sensemaking framework provides a springboard for reflection, central to the research questions within this study. A student support professional should aim to identify the new employees’ expectations, experiences, culture, connection, support system, and decision making, all within the Four C’s of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection.

Sensemaking plays an important role in this study. This retrospective and comparative process is crucial as student support professionals look back on the onboarding experience. “We rely on past experiences to interpret current events” (Mills et al., 2010, p. 184). Due to the

spiraling continuum of processes, sensemaking is critical in the interpretation of the onboarding 31 building blocks of culture and connections. This section described sensemaking process through four lenses: sensemaking through socialization, sensemaking as a process, sensemaking through storytelling, and sensemaking through sensegiving. Sensemaking is a never-ending iterative process. Employees are constantly making sense of their organizational world. Sensemaking starts as soon as newcomers enter the organization, and onboarding turns this organic sensemaking process into a sensegiving process.

Onboarding

Onboarding, the final conceptual frame, is the strategic process helping the new hire adapt to the company culture and become a productive and long-standing employee (EBSCO Corporate Learning Watch, 2011). “Organizational socialization, or onboarding, is a process through which new employees move from being organizational outsiders to becoming organizational insiders” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2014, p. 51; Bauer et al., 2007). Onboarding refers to the process through which new employees learn the attitudes, knowledge, skills, and behaviors required to function effectively and fit in within an organization (Bauer et al., 2007). The impact of this conceptual framework is the most critical for the study, since onboarding is the bridge between the employee’s talent and productivity (Bauer, 2010). Onboarding can be a “well-managed speedy path to employee contribution, or an inefficient and costly entry into the organization” (Snell, 2006, p. 32). This portion of the literature review includes: when and where onboarding occurs, Bauer’s (2010) Four C’s of onboarding, the formal versus informal approaches, and the benefits and challenges

Onboarding is a process. In some instances, onboarding begins with recruitment and can be up to two years in length. In other examples, onboarding is misnamed, and it is a simple one-

or two-day orientation experience. Onboarding occurs in business and in higher education. An 32 understanding of current onboarding practices in the two sectors helps to better understand the experiences of student support professionals. Leaders in higher education can learn from these examples with an aim to promote the building blocks of culture and connection. Student support professionals can learn from the examples what they may or may not receive in terms of an onboarding experience as a newcomer.

Onboarding has been prevalent in business for well over a decade. In 2006, The Economist named Michael Watkins' published book, *The First 90 Days*, "the onboarding bible" (Economist, 2006, p. 72). Onboarding examples can now be found in various higher education settings; however, onboarding hasn't always been a major concern at many colleges and universities. In 2015, when asked to prioritize the talent management activities that most need improvement, higher education institutions ranked onboarding second to last (People Admin, n.d.). The following examples of effective onboarding in business and higher education will aid in this study to understand how student support professionals experience onboarding.

Onboarding in Business

Onboarding occurs in a variety of business settings, including nursing, banking, social media, entertainment, and retail. The following examples of intentional onboarding practices in the business sector provide themes of newcomer support, beyond the first day or month, with multiple stakeholders involved in the newcomer's onboarding process. Themes of newcomer support situate very well alongside Bauer's (2010) building blocks of onboarding, the Four C's. Themes include dialogue and interaction, similar to the building block of connection, rather than settling on completing mandatory paperwork or web-based training, similar to the building block of compliance. Another theme is welcoming the newcomer into the organization and providing

the newcomer with formal and informal cultural norms, relative to the building blocks of connection and culture. Onboarding is an on-going process, which may include consistent feedback, similar to the building block of clarification, with checkpoints communicated along the way.

In the nursing workforce, D'Aurizio (2007) described onboarding as a promise to newcomers, claiming employees as the biggest assets in healthcare. D'Aurizio applied Frears' (2007) definition of onboarding, a "holistic approach combining people, process, and technology to optimize the impact a new hire has on the organization with an emphasis on both effectiveness and efficiency" (D'Aurizio, 2007, p. 4). Recruiters and managers play an essential role in the onboarding process, beyond "packets of literature to web-based portals" (D'Aurizio, 2007, p. 228).

D'Aurizio (2007) pointed to three key elements of an excellent onboarding program: process, support, and follow up. The process included recruitment. This is an exchange between the recruiter and candidate. The candidate is already observing how the recruiter feels about the organization. Once hired, the departments that welcome new hires will retain employees, bringing in the support element. A complete collection of resources is available to newcomers, even beyond the organization, including community resources. The support element includes more than one month and up to one year of onboarding. A preceptor or mentor is paired with the newcomer, with responsibility for regular networking activities and feedback sessions.

The final element is follow up. This checkpoint is relative to the newcomer's expectations being met as a post-hire interview. All new hires from one timeframe may be informally interviewed together, if possible. Human resources may handle the interviews, as a neutral representative of the organization. Meetings can be held at intervals of 45 days, 90 days,

6 months and 1 year. When the three processes are done well, newcomers feel a sense of belonging, or connection. They also grow to understand the culture of the organization.

The banking industry claims onboarding as a pivotal activity. Within Bank of America's commitment to leadership development, the organization plans for an onboarding timeframe of 12-18 months, with commitment to multiple stakeholders providing multiple interventions throughout the selection, entry, and on-boarding phases (Conger & Fishel, 2007). "The approach must therefore focus on the quality of dialogue and interaction rather than documentation and formal processes" (Conger & Fishel, 2007, p. 446). Bank of America's key elements of onboarding include business, culture, leadership, and the organization (Conger & Fishel, 2007). The onboarding timeline includes an entry phase, a mid-point phase, and the final phase, in which the newcomer receives feedback from the past 18 months. The authors pointed to the problem as little time devoted for onboarding banking professionals with complex roles. Feedback along the way is an important aspect of the banking onboarding timeline (Conger & Fishel, 2007). If newcomers are to lead within the organization, they must be provided the multiple resources, support, and interventions necessary, including learning about the culture and connection within the organization and between stakeholders.

L'Oréal added an onboarding tool in 2017, to complement the six-month strategic onboarding program already in place in order to develop successful, committed and mutually beneficial relationships with employees. The Fit Culture App is a mobile app that helps newcomers understand the century old company culture. Newcomers have access to topics such as: entrepreneurship, agility, networking, and collaboration. L'Oréal's Director of International Learning Practice sees the enhanced onboarding feature as a tool to offer newcomers appropriate key values through challenges, personal stories and videos. Newcomers can watch videos, take

quizzes, and earn points through games as they learn the company culture and interact through 35
the various aspects of the app, all within their first month at L'Oréal. While this onboarding tool
lacks the relationship component, it strives to connect newcomers and share the culture of the
organization.

John Deere's "First Day Experience" includes key onboarding elements on the first days,
such as lunch with the boss, or a package on the desk with the company's history and goals. This
points to efforts around the onboarding building blocks of connection and culture (Bauer, 2010).
Newcomers feel a sense of belonging and appreciation for the contribution of work. The
investment of creating special moments improves "employee engagement, employee retention
and employee loyalty. It matters to people when you pay attention to the moments that mean
something" (Peake, 2017). The First Day can be understood as three transitions at once:
intellectual, social, and environmental (Heath & Heath, 2017). Rather than a day of paperwork
and compliance, the day should be filled with peak moments. Routine and repetition tend to rob
an organization of peak moments. The John Deere First Day Experience was developed, but the
rollout, across Asia, for example, was not consistent. Onboarding was not a priority. At John
Deere, the first days are to be filled with moments of elevation (Heath & Heath, 2017). "The
absence or neglect of peaks is particularly glaring in organizations—from churches to schools to
businesses—where relentless routines tend to grind them down from peaks to bumps" (Heath
and Heath, 2017, p. 44).

Onboarding in Higher Education

Onboarding strategy in business is moving to higher education. The examples of
onboarding practices in higher education can be found at both public and private institutions
across the United States. Onboarding examples in higher education may include strategic human

resources themes such as: process, support, culture, mentorship, and designated professional 36
roles in the institution and physical space. There are examples of institutions involved in learning
and testing new ideas specific to onboarding. There are also examples of institutions going above
and beyond the required compliance level of onboarding. Kaufman (1981) pointed out “to ensure
a successful assimilation to the new role and campus culture, successfully filling a position must
extend beyond the recruitment and hiring process and the obligatory human-resource
orientation” (p. 9).

The Minnesota State system, which is made up of 37 colleges and universities, showed
interest in how to best share information and provide onboarding for employees. Through a
leadership development cohort offered by the Minnesota State system, a team was charged with
developing an onboarding program that created a welcome and inclusive environment during the
first year for new faculty and staff. The focus was on four key components of the onboarding
process:

1. Make the new employee feel welcome from the minute they walk in the door.
2. Schedule functional and required training right away.
3. Connect the new employee to peers and mentors and help them build
relationships with stakeholders.
4. Maintain consistent follow-up and support.

The priorities were to gather best practices, create a model of essential elements of onboarding,
and present findings to other institutions. The project focused on the connection and culture
building blocks (Bauer, 2010). Five challenges were identified: current process limits
opportunities for connection, current process lacks clear stewardship and unified vision,
employees are hired periodically throughout the year, different appointment types for faculty

require variations upon the onboarding experience, and participation and engagement in the onboarding process was not mandatory.

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A class project in the Administrative Community Colleges at Central Michigan University (CMU) addressed the need for new hires at community colleges to become familiar with what it means to work at a community college, the history of community colleges, issues facing community colleges, information on community college students, and an understanding of the college itself (Eddy et al., 2004). Since new hires may or may not be from higher education (Corrigan, 2018), the master's and doctoral candidates responsible for the project created a website containing all of the information they had gathered in their research. The CMU College of Education web master assisted students in the project. This project was devoted to the onboarding building block of culture (Bauer, 2010).

As mentioned previously, the simplest onboarding process in higher education may not be onboarding, but rather, orientation. Pepperdine's onboarding is mainly an internal checklist for hiring. The university culture, history, and mission are the one-time onboarding focus within new employee orientation (Pepperdine, 2022). University-wide expectations and wellness are included in the orientation.

Finally, in examining the examples of onboarding in higher education, a university's commitment to strategic human resources, through onboarding efforts, may present itself in a formal position. A recent posting for an onboarding specialist position at New York University, New York, New York, requires two plus years of relevant experience as a human resources coordinator, on-boarding specialist, or equivalent combination of education and work experience. Key skills required include problem solving, strong communication skills, and an ability to collaborate at all levels within and outside the organization. The role also requires an

understanding of the university, policies, procedures, and an ability to administer business processes and requests. This investment in human capital points to an increasing need for meaningful onboarding practices in higher education.

Renn and Hodges (2007) conducted a qualitative longitudinal study with 10 student support professionals, each with five years or less experience in the field. The study was conducted through online data collection over three time phases: pre-employment and orientation, transition, and settling in. The 2005 graduate student participants were asked to respond to open-ended questions each month regarding their experiences, challenges, and surprises (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Three themes emerged from the responses from the ten participants: relationships, fit, and competencies. These themes relate to this study of the onboarding experience and why onboarding is necessary. It also challenges us to take a closer look at the relationships, or connections through onboarding, and the fit, or how the newcomer experiences the culture through onboarding. The greatest need that arose from the study was the newcomers' request for additional training. Previous studies found similar themes as participants voiced specific needs around professional development: receiving adequate support, understanding organization culture, establishing a professional network and/or mentor, and clarifying job expectations (Amey & Reesor, 2015; Magolda & Carnaghi, 2004).

Keisling and Laning (2016) studied 20 new academic librarians in various settings and career stages and what they considered to be important to learn during onboarding and the best approaches to sharing information. The research was in response to gaps in the academic library literature regarding employees' perspectives of their onboarding experiences. The study focused on: understanding the newcomers' perspective of the onboarding experience, what they learned that was helpful, what signature strengths of new employees were shared through the onboarding

process and how the administrators deepen their knowledge about librarians' signature strengths³⁹ (Keisling & Laning, 2016). The most common responses relative to the onboarding experience were around a traditional orientation, checklists, and tours. The most helpful experience was meetings with key people in the institution. The findings revealed strengths of the newcomers to be job-related skills and prior experience (Keisling & Laning, 2016). Connecting with other individuals was the key recommendation from newcomers in this study. Frequent opportunities to meet with others and check-ins during the onboarding process would make the experience more successful. Newcomers experienced four specific areas of learning or construction in their onboarding: alliances, efficacy, expectations and reflection (Keisling & Laning, 2016). The exchange of information between the organization and newcomer is a complex process. This study focused on what newcomers hoped to learn and the ability of the organization to recognize strengths of the newcomers throughout the onboarding process. Newcomers want to know what is expected of them and how to accomplish their roles. Further research could include an investigation of institutional leadership's understanding of the onboarding contribution to newcomers.

Onboarding is a process that is sometimes misunderstood as simply orientation. The examples of onboarding in the business sector and in higher education reveal a vast difference in how the onboarding process occurs. Higher education can learn from the business sector's focus on newcomer support from multiple stakeholders and beyond the first days on the job. When onboarding is intentional and treated as a priority, newcomers are supported and able to move through the newcomer phases in the first 18 months. Newcomers in higher education are looking for additional training and support, to connect with others through a professional network, and to understand the organizational culture (Amey & Reesor, 2015; Magolda & Carnighi, 2004;

Keisling & Laning, 2016; Renn & Hodges, 2007). Understanding onboarding as a process is 40
critical in understanding the onboarding experiences of student support professionals.

The Four C’s

Talya Bauer (2010) introduced a popular and often-cited framework called the Four C’s—compliance, clarification, culture, and connection—to show the range of onboarding activities. The degree to which each organization leverages these four building blocks determines its overall onboarding strategy, formal or informal, with most firms falling into one of three levels. Table 2 shows the levels and the four building blocks. Level 1 is passive onboarding, which includes compliance and some clarification but little or no culture and connection. Level 2 is high potential onboarding, which includes compliance, clarification, some culture, and some connection. Level 3 is proactive onboarding, which includes compliance, clarification, culture, and connection.

Table 2

Four C’s and Onboarding Strategy Levels

| Onboarding Strategy Level | Compliance | Clarification | Culture | Connection |
|----------------------------------|-------------------|----------------------|----------------|-------------------|
| 1 Passive | Yes | Some | Little/None | Little/None |
| 2 High Potential | Yes | Yes | Some | Some |
| 3 Proactive | Yes | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Compliance

The first building block of successful onboarding is compliance. Passive onboarding is seen as “a checklist of unrelated tasks to be completed” (Bauer, 2010, p. 3). The Aberdeen Group (2008) reported 30 percent of organizations, of all sizes, are involved in passive onboarding.

Organizations involved in passive onboarding, are operational rather than strategic in carrying 41
out the human resources function (Boxall et al., 2011). Compliance may be initiated prior to the
employee start date, which includes data collection, reminders, and activity tracking (Snell,
2006). When ramp-up time is shortened and socialization can occur earlier, the newcomer's time
and energy is optimized through automated onboarding. Snell believes the perfect first day
means the paperwork is already complete, workspace is ready, co-workers share a welcome, and
someone is assigned to help the newcomer navigate the environment. In other words, the
compliance component of onboarding is mostly complete, and the connections can start
immediately. Automating the compliance piece of the onboarding process on the front end can
drive the process in promoting positive employee engagement and socialization. This moves the
organization's goals toward organizational performance outcomes. Compliance is step one
(Snell, 2006).

Clarification

The second building block of successful onboarding is clarification. "Role clarity refers
to the what, when, where, who, and how of getting one's job done" (Bauer, 2015, p. 3). A
consistent clarification experience for the newcomer helps the building blocks of culture and
connection happen more organically. Newcomers with greater clarity are more likely to take
risks; ask questions; learn more about the new job, role, colleagues and organization; and be
more effective. The organizational outcomes of the clarification stage occur in job performance
and satisfaction, commitment, referral, intention to remain, and reduction of turnover (Bauer et
al., 2007).

Culture

The third building block of onboarding is culture. "Culture perpetuates and reproduces

itself through the socialization of new members entering the group” (Schein, 1990, p. 115). The 42 three outcomes that can occur are: custodial orientation (total conformity), creative individualism (partial conformity), or rebellion (total rejection). The goal is minimizing conflict and defining shared goals. This can be accomplished through four tenets of the culture building block of onboarding: environment (Tinto, 2000), wellbeing (Anderson et al., 2000), storytelling (Stephenson, 2015), and institutional saga (Clark, 1972b).

Tinto (2000) posited the environment matters, relative to culture, in regards to what is located at the center of campus, what is located on the edge of campus, who is in the space, what the locations say about the relationships on campus. Culture develops when the external environment and the institution’s foundational roots intersect, such as in cultural artifacts, including: stories, charismatic leaders, supporters of the institution, and architecture. The physical settings, or environmental aspects of the organization, are important for the newcomer to observe. Within the institution, consideration of the mission statement as structure and culture, and space as support and enactment of mission, can strategically link mission and space (Fugazzotto, 2009). Words shared with a new employee may not parallel the constructed environment. The newcomer’s place in the organization may not be reflected in the physical aspects of the culture. In higher education, how the campus is decorated or “resourced,” and where and at what level, can reflect more about the culture. Institutional history may be undervalued or unrecognized as new buildings and programs represent progress and change.

Wellbeing is a topic within the onboarding process and within student support. Intentional conversations around wellbeing among student support professionals can ultimately inform the onboarding experience. This low-cost framework should be ongoing for student support professionals. Half of all student support professionals leave the field within the first five

years of employment (Renn & Hodges, 2007). Institutions that champion wellbeing will lessen 43 turnover rates, stress, health issues, and low job satisfaction for student support professionals (Anderson et al., 2000). New professionals are prone to working long hours in order to prove their competence while misinterpreting the institutional office culture. Connecting work and health for student support professionals means the professionals feel appreciated for their work and they experience greater self-esteem, which boosts immunity and cardiovascular functions (Reinhold, 1996).

Storytelling is another aspect of the culture level in onboarding. Stephenson (2015) encouraged intentional onboarding through storytelling in order to build employee buy-in. An organization's participants "need to communicate what their organization is about to new members" (Tierney, 1999, p. 127). Storytelling can be further intentional as new employees can hear about the strengths of the organization as well as the opportunities for improvement. Culture develops over time, based on continued social interactions (Morgan, 1997). Making onboarding a priority as an entire organization helps to build the organization internally and externally.

Rituals, or repetitive activities with symbolic meaning, within the institution also shed light on the institutional culture (Anand, 2005). Employee recognition efforts, such as service or professional awards are rituals that show the institutional values and behavior. The concept of organizational or institutional "saga" refers to "those long-standing characteristics that determine distinctiveness of a college or university" (Clark, 1970a, p. 235). Institutional rituals and saga are continually shaped and built upon through sharing of communication and unique cultural history.

Connection

The final building block of successful onboarding is connection. Heath and Heath (2017) defined connection as moments that create shared meaning. Connections bond us with others.

Groups bond when they struggle or work together. Just as with the students on our campuses, it ⁴⁴ is important to ensure new professionals are retained in the profession, are successful, and are constantly learning and growing. One factor that helps new professionals remain in the profession is to develop connections. “Making professional connections starts with building relationships with colleagues and mentors who can continue to help you develop in the field” (Reesor et al., 2015, p. 198).

Onboarding provides employees with a sense of “fitting in” at work, helping employees build relationships and giving the employee a head start (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). The University of Central Florida (UCF) practices culture and connection building blocks in onboarding:

The onboarding process at UCF Athletics is all about the power of first impressions, and the importance of building a strong bond between the new employee and the organization. For example, instead of just hearing from HR staff members regarding logistics and benefits, our new hires receive personal welcome calls from their new supervisor as well as fellow teammates before they come for their first day. These conversations help set the tone in terms of culture and expectations, as well as provide for support for the new hire as they prepare for this opportunity. (Branson & Stephenson, 2015, p. 20)

Formal and Informal Onboarding. Organizational socialization and onboarding are interchangeable in academic research, however, there is a difference between formal and informal onboarding. “A formal orientation program indoctrinates new employees to the company culture, as well as introduces them to their new jobs and colleagues” (Bauer & Erdogan, 2014, p. 381). Formal onboarding refers to a written set of coordinated policies and

procedures that assist an employee in adjusting to his or her new job in terms of both task and socialization (Zahrly & Tosi, 1989). Informal onboarding refers to the process by which an employee learns about his or her new job without or beyond an explicit organizational plan (Zahrly & Tosi, 1989). 45

Four key components of organizational socialization that make up effective onboarding experiences include: culture, network development, career development and strategy (Stein & Christiansen, 2010). Newcomers must learn the culture and values of the organization in order to connect with the broader purpose, performance expectations, social norms, behaviors and habits. Networking allows for connections with other newcomers, coworkers and teammates. This promotes acceptance and opportunities to learn from others. An organization that promotes career growth early on will help newcomers feel more committed to the organization. Strategy points to the role of newcomers in the organization and the significance of the professional contribution to the organization.

For this study, student support professionals will be asked to reflect on their onboarding experience. Understanding informal onboarding and formal onboarding will help to identify with the experiences more deeply.

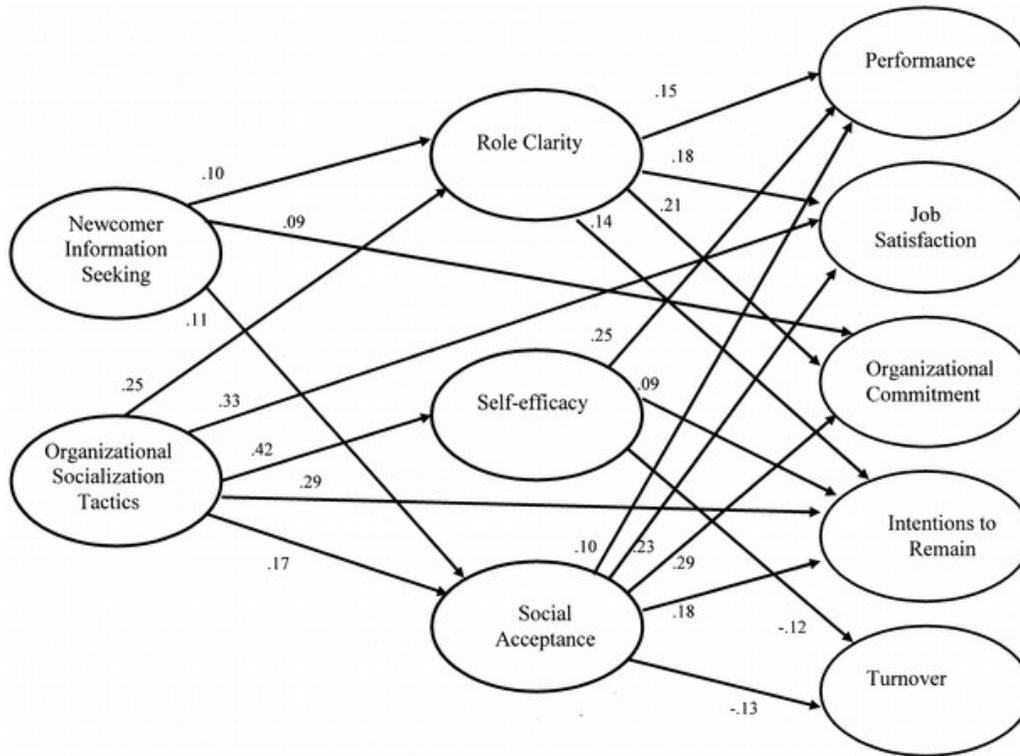
Research shows that organizations that engage in formal onboarding by implementing step-by-step programs for new employees to teach them what their roles are, what the norms of the company are and how they are to behave are more effective than those that do not. (Bauer, 2010, p. 2)

Several studies support Bauer's (2010) statement. The first is a meta-analysis study (Bauer et al., 2007) found newcomer adjustment directly influences important organizational outcomes, such as new employee job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee

referrals, intentions to remain, and turnover. The goals of the study included an integration of 46 socialization research “into a model of antecedents and outcomes of adjustment, to study the effects of different methodological approaches by comparing them meta-analytically, to make a contribution by summarizing existing relationship and uncovering relationships that deserve further attention” (Bauer et al., 2007). The study included antecedents of newcomer information seeking and organizational social tactics (Saks & Ashforth, 1997). The study revealed role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance as indicators of newcomer adjustment, similar to Feldman (1981). Feldman’s (1981) two-prong approach of task and social transitions for the newcomer formed the newcomer adjustment aspects of: resolution of role demands, task mastery, and adjustment to one’s group. By placing those pieces in order, the study revealed positive relationships occurred between newcomer adjustment and job performance (included job satisfaction, organizational commitment and intentions to remain), and turnover (Bauer et al., 2007). Successful adjustment means newcomers are less likely to quit.

Figure 1 below represents newcomer adjustments during organization socialization. Outcomes on the far right were positive in relationship to the antecedents of newcomer adjustments during organizational socialization, with the exception of turnover. (Bauer et al., 2007) focused on newcomers who had been with the organization for 13 months or less. They also focused on organizational socialization rather than occupational socialization. This is the difference between learning to work at a new institution as director of resident life versus learning to be a director of residence life. The study was consistent with Feldman’s (1981) findings that role clarity, self-efficacy, and social acceptance are indicators of newcomer adjustment.

Standardized Parameter Estimates from the Final Socialization Model



Source. Bauer et al. (2007)

Benefits and Challenges. Benefits of onboarding include increased job satisfaction, increased performance and commitment and decreased turnover (Bauer, 2010; Dobbs, 2001; Sullivan, 2006). Onboarding increases employee competency and commitment to the organization (Haywood, 1992; Klein, 2000). New hire orientation can flatten the organizational hierarchy, leading not with formal power, but with passion, taking each step together in order to create change and social movement in the institution (Wheatley, 2002). And finally, onboarding helps new employees adjust to their jobs through relationships, clear expectations, and support (Bauer, 2010). Challenges with onboarding include cost, ownership of the process by the organization, engagement level of the organization and the newcomer, and intentional planning.

Onboarding is an Investment. Organizational leaders may not appreciate the value and

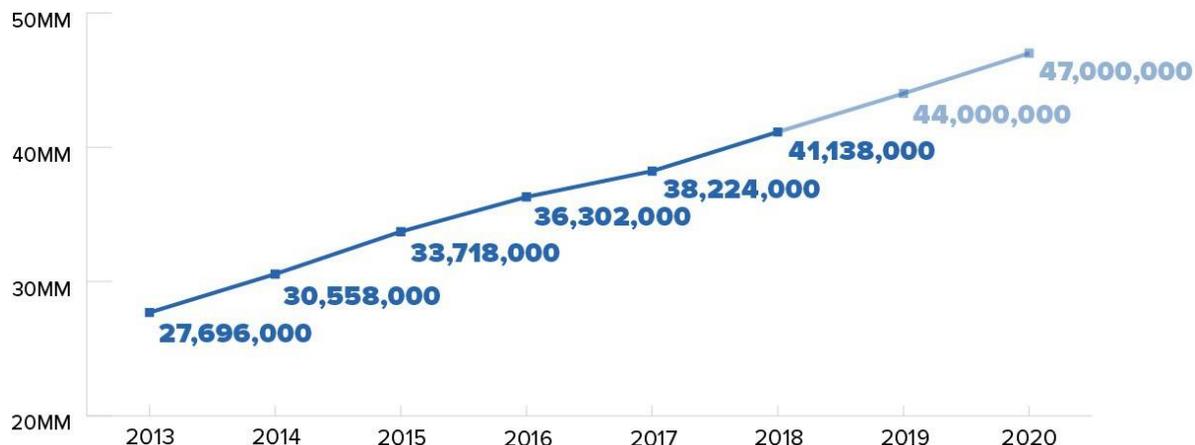
impact onboarding can bring as it is “an emerging discipline with only a short history” (Stein & Christiansen, 2010, p. 17). The cost of attracting talent approaches 30% of a new hire’s annual salary (Stein & Christiansen, 2010, p. 17). Investing in strategic incorporation of talent into the firm would mean lesser need to rehire.

Companies do spend a fair amount of direct spend on onboarding (in addition to indirect spend, which includes all the costs associated with unproductive new hires), much of it wasted because of their insufficiently organized and poorly designed efforts. An effective onboarding program can address this basis requirement and help cut waste in a number of ways. (Stein & Christiansen, 2010, p. 22)

Snell (2006) believed “onboarding can be a strategic process, rather than a transaction” (p. 32). The average hiring mistake costs 15 times an employee’s base salary in hard costs and productivity loss (Smart & Street, 2008). Costs of losing a new hire may include direct costs such as recruitment, relocation, and compensation; and indirect costs such as lost opportunity, delays, and damage to relationships with internal and external constituents. It can take up to six months before the employee’s contribution exceeds the cost of onboarding the individual (Wells, 2005). An estimated 41.4 million people voluntarily quit their jobs in 2018, according to the Work Institute, a Franklin, Tennessee based consulting firm (see Figure 2 below). By 2020, that number will jump to 47 million, or roughly 1 in 3 workers, the firm predicts.

Figure 2

Number of People Who Voluntarily Quit their Jobs in 2018



Note. 2018 2018 figure is estimated; 2019 and 2020 figures are projected.

Source. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Work Institute.

Additional Barriers. While implementing onboarding may be a hard sell for organizational leader, an additional barrier is ownership, “It’s no one’s job, it’s a hassle, something is always more urgent” (Heath & Heath, 2017, p. 64). Taken a step further, the argument claimed that onboarding “isn’t enough.” Even onboarding at the highest level cannot fix problems with colleagues and unfamiliar norms and expectations (Byford et al., 2017). Most organizations claim to have an onboarding system in place. The authors posit a more aspirational goal, using the term “integration” to describe what it takes to ensure the team members are fully engaged in the quickest time. Integration can mean different things to different organizations. Many use it to describe only the compliance and clarification onboarding steps. Integration support around five main tasks is key: assuming operational leadership, taking charge of the team, aligning with stakeholders, engaging with the culture and defining strategic intent.

Methods Matter. Mather et al. (2009) posited mid-level student support professionals received little orientation and institutional introduction in their new positions. The first step is a written onboarding plan, communicated to all organizational members, consistently applied and tracked over time (Bauer & Elder, 2006). Duke University divides responsibility for orientation

for mid-level student support professionals between three areas. The department, the student support division, and a designated mentor each play a part. Human resources is responsible for the compliance procedures for all employees. Additionally, a monthly “staff coffee” provided an opportunity for division employees to focus on areas in which they desired deeper training (Nisbet et al., 1999). 50

Formal orientations have an impact on important individual outcomes for employees (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). In a study of 261 newcomers, face-to-face orientation resulted in a greater understanding of the job and company compared to computer-based training (Wesson & Gogus, 2005). Newcomers participated in a group, social-based orientation or an individual, or computer-based orientation session. The computer-based training resulted in less socialization. Since socialization is continuous, additional research could focus on the amount of time it takes newcomers who experience lower levels of socialization after orientation to match those with higher levels. Proactive onboarding organizations create check-in meetings between the newcomer and stakeholders at intervals based on solving problems along the way and getting employees information in a timely manner (Bauer, 2010). Computer-based orientation system benefits include tracking the needs of new employees, monitoring progress in onboarding steps and automating basic forms (Aberdeen, 2008). Methods used have a direct impact on socialization.

Formal orientations have an impact on important organizational outcomes as well. Onboarding should not be limited to a single piece of software. Beyond reducing administrative cost, strategic onboarding can help improve performance in bigger ways. Improvement objectives may be easier to quantify in terms of business impact. Stein and Christiansen (2010) provided possible objectives an organization would then create a customized program around (p.

Engagement Levels. Engagement levels are included in the improvement objectives above. Engagement levels in onboarding are directly related to the Four C's (Bauer, 2010). Bauer (2010) provided short-term and long-term outcomes of onboarding. The short-term outcomes are based on new employee adjustment. The first level is self-efficacy or self-confidence in job performance (Saks, 1995). Onboarding should boost employee confidence in order to impact organizational commitment, satisfaction and turnover (Bauer et al., 2007). The second level, role clarity, reflects how well the employee understands the specific role (Feldman, 1981). Social integration is the third level in successful onboarding (Morrison, 2002b). This is specific to the Four C's building block of connection. Connections may include mentors, key introductions, key stakeholder check-ins, and effective technology use. Meeting and working alongside colleagues, and feeling comfortable and accepted by peers, are indicators of adjustment (Bauer & Green, 1998). Integration into the workplace impacts commitment and turnover (Kammeyer-Mueller & Wanberg, 2003). Knowledge of and fit within organizational culture is the fourth onboarding lever. As newcomers navigate the culture and their place within the culture (Cooper et al., 2004), their adjustment is directly related to understanding organizational language, goals, values and politics (Chao et al., 1994).

Long-term outcomes of onboarding include the newcomer attitudes and behaviors. Effective onboarding produces the following benefits: higher job satisfaction, organizational commitment, lower turnover, higher performance levels, role effectiveness and lowered stress (Ashford & Black, 1996; Bauer et al., 2007; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). New employees involved in a study at Corning Glass, Corning, New York, who experienced formal onboarding were 69 percent more likely to remain at the company up after three years compared to those on

their own as newcomers (Ganzel, 1998). Detailed information around data collection and the type of analysis was not available. There is a failure in the literature as research data is provided in corporate white papers with featured studies conducted by companies selling an onboarding product. 52

Summary

This literature review takes a closer look at the conceptual frameworks of socialization, sensemaking and onboarding. Human resources serve as a general frame or perspective for this study. An organization's greatest asset is the employees, or human capital. The organization's human resource systems support the development of human capital. Human resources serve as the "communicator between employees and employers" (Crume 2012, as cited in Tull & Kuk, 2012, p. 91). Three tenets of human resources are: needs, strategies and relationships. Basic needs such as affiliation drive the onboarding process as newcomers seek to belong to and understand the organization. Formal and informal onboarding practices can be viewed as human resource strategies.

Relationships are key in understanding the conceptual frameworks of socialization and onboarding. Socialization is the broadest description of the relationship between the employee and the organization. The socialization process also includes the relationship between the newcomer and the manager. The method of socialization, formal or informal, is important to understand in distinguishing between an institutionalized or individualized approach. The newcomer may learn more from individual interactions with insiders as opposed to learning alongside many other newcomers as a group. Manager behavior and formal onboarding practice may assist in the socialization process.

Sensemaking is the conceptual framework, which describes newcomers seeking meaning

through an ongoing, spiraling process. As newcomers interpret events in the new setting from the⁵³ very first day, sensemaking is critical in understanding the building blocks of onboarding through the Four C's of compliance, clarification, connection and culture (Bauer, 2010). Newcomers are constantly making sense of the organization from the very start. Sensemaking evolves to sensegiving through the onboarding process.

Onboarding describes the process in which the newcomer moves beyond compliance and clarification steps and begins to make deeper professional connections and understand the organizational culture. The Four C's (Bauer, 2010) provide a framework for understand onboarding that goes beyond the first few days on the job. Connecting meaningful networking opportunities between newcomers and institutional leaders as well as an understanding of the culture will aid with retention and commitment. Understanding the onboarding examples, methods, benefits and challenges and will assist in understanding the onboarding experiences of student support professionals. Socialization represents the broadest relationship between the employee and the organization. Sensemaking represents the interpretation and meaning the newcomer experiences. In order to capture the conceptual frameworks embedded in the onboarding process and build upon current onboarding practices, student support professionals must share their onboarding experience and organizational leaders must learn the impact of intentional onboarding processes.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how student support professionals experience onboarding. In order to identify how the four building blocks of onboarding are experienced, specifically the last two building blocks, connection and culture (Bauer, 2010), participants were interviewed to get to the core of the onboarding experience (Tesch, 1990). Newcomers make sense of onboarding through the meanings people bring to newcomers (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). The aim of the research was to understand how participants interpreted their experiences, how they constructed their worlds and what meaning they attributed to their experiences (Merriam, 2009; Van Maanen, 1990).

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. How do student support professionals experience onboarding?
2. How do student support professionals make connections through the onboarding process?
3. How do student support professionals understand the culture of the institution through the onboarding process?

This chapter includes a description of how the study was conducted, the research design including methodological literature which supports the design, a description of the participants of the study, the techniques used for data collection, the procedures used to analyze data, and the design elements and procedures used to ensure data quality. The chapter also includes how the rights of human subjects were protected, as well as the procedures and timeline associated with the research.

This study used a qualitative design to explore the onboarding experience of student support professionals at four-year public universities within a Midwestern state system.

Advantages to the qualitative design include: self-reflexivity, context, and thick description (Tracy, 2013). Qualitative design is “emergent and flexible, responsive to changing conditions of the study in progress” (Merriam, 2009). The timing-of-structure continuum describes a process in which the focus of the research questions, and the structure in the design and data, unfold and emerge as the empirical work proceeds (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I was not engaged in the onboarding process and did not interview experts in onboarding, therefore building meaning right along with the participants (Tracy, 2013). In order to learn as much as possible about the onboarding experience in terms of who, what, when, where, and how, thick descriptions of participants’ onboarding experiences were captured, in order to quote participants in the findings. This information may lead to transferability in understanding onboarding experiences that contribute to higher education overall.

It was important to allow for the participants to describe their understanding of the onboarding experience. The perspective of participants came first (Cernea, 1985; Kushner, 2000). Studying how student support professionals experience onboarding is personal. In order to learn from an open perspective, respect was shown to respondents “by making their ideas and opinions (stated in their own terms) the important data source” (Patton, 2002, p. 175). It was also a matter of depth in the qualitative research approach, with attention to the detail and context (Patton, 2002). While the onboarding experience can never fully be understood, information gathered from interviews provided a broader range and greater depth than, for example, a survey form would allow of experiences from a larger number of people.

Lincoln, 1994). The aim was to understand the meaning the newcomers have constructed, how the newcomers made sense out of their experiences, understood the process, and described the experience (Merriam, 2009). Realities of the newcomer are socially and experientially based. The emic perspective of the newcomer, “that of the insider to the culture” (Merriam, 2009, p. 29), provided insight in understanding cultural practices and connections associated with the onboarding experience, and more important, the way the newcomer made sense of the cultural and connection practices.

The main structure of the design of the study, the interviews, and the interview questions, supported the exploration of the onboarding process for student support professionals through Bauer’s (2010) Four C’s of onboarding. A description of onboarding from the participants, as well as descriptions of how other employees interacted with new employees were investigated. The impact of these conversations on future onboarding experiences within higher education was also investigated.

Participants

This study followed a purposeful sampling of convenience and opportunity (Patton, 2002; Tracy, 2013). In order to understand and gain insight regarding the onboarding phenomenon, I selected a sample from which the most could be learned (Merriam, 2009, p. 77). A convenience sample fit this study in order to complete the study at a low cost and an efficient speed (Tracy, 2013). Two factors that directed the choice of participants included: the length of time they have been at their institution and a willingness to share their experience, through an audio recorded interview.

For the purpose of the study, newcomers are defined as “members with relatively low tenure” (Rollag, 2007). Participants selected were recently hired student support professionals, new to the institution within the past year, from within a Midwestern state system of colleges and universities. Focusing on a state system allowed for a broad variety of participants and institutional roles represented within student support. 57

Once approval was obtained from the St. Cloud State University Institutional Review Board (IRB; see Appendix B), a list of 53 new student support professionals was accessed through the state system office. The professionals were people whose job was to support students and their success. All participants jobs were in universities in the state system. Twenty newcomers were invited to participate in the study through an email introduction and letter. The email included a consent form, approved by the IRB (see Appendix C). This stated the participant’s consent to participate in the study in an audio- recorded interview.

A reasonable sample size was an important aspect of this study. The initial plan was for 8-10 interviews. The final number of participants was 10, as determined by saturation. Interviews continued until all categories were saturated, and there were no longer new perspectives to be learned from the participants’ responses. Interviews continued until I “began to see or hear the same things over and over again, and no new information surfaces” as more data was collected (Merriam, 2009, p. 219). The 10 participants represented nine departments within several institutions. This variety in participants and their institutional roles brought great insight to the research. Participants were assigned pseudonyms and confidentiality was maintained (see Table 3). In order to protect the participant’s privacy, changes in subjects’ characteristics were used in the published results (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Participant Pseudonyms

| | |
|---------|--------|
| Ally | Krista |
| Brenda | Mary |
| Eric | Matt |
| Heather | Megan |
| Karen | Shani |

Data Collection

This study incorporated face-to-face interviews, observations through jottings during the interview, audio recordings, and the use of an interview guide that lists general guiding questions in a semi-structured design. Data were collected through observation/field notes and semi-structured interviewing (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).

Interview Process

Interviews were held mostly at the participant’s institution, in the space of his or her choice, which allowed for fewest interruptions. Good locations as characterized by Tracy (2013) provided easy access, quiet space with distractions, safe, comfortable and were technology friendly. Participants chose the following locations: hotel lobby cafe, campus library, campus coffee shop, and a campus meeting room. All interviews were conducted before the Covid shutdown.

I arrived early, confirmed the meeting space was available and retested the audio equipment. I greeted each participant with a handshake and a bottled water. I reviewed the purpose of the interview, timeframe, and the topics we would cover. Confidentiality was explained and the consent form was presented. While each participant filled out the consent form, I noted general observations to begin with, such as the location, the room setup, and the participant’s disposition and appearance. Each interview took around 60 minutes total. There was

time at the end of each interview for debriefing.

59

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Two recorders, along with batteries were brought to the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with an interview guide of less structured interview questions. Each interview was a conversation, with the participant talking and me mostly listening (Neumann, Babitzke & Leedy, 2007). I aimed to turn each interview into a conversation that produced meaning (Tracy, 2013). This encouraged reflection and insight on the part of each participant. In some cases, it was apparent the participant had not yet taken the time to think deeply about their onboarding experience, as emotion came to the surface in their response. In that case, my body language and non-verbal response to them was important. I wanted to express “warmth, acceptance and neutrality” (Tracy, 2013, p. 162). I was sensitive in my note taking technique and had introduced that at the start of the interview.

My presence during the interview may have affected participants, or my role as interviewer may have affected the data, At the end of the interview, I shut off the recorder. In two instances, the participant became emotional and shared additional experiences. In both cases, I asked if I could include that information in the data collection. Both agreed that would be fine. Upon closing, I thanked each participant for their time and expertise and left them with a \$10 gift card to either Starbucks or Caribou. Within an hour of each interview, I followed up with an email thanking each of them as well. I also took that timeframe as an opportunity to write more notes about the interview, including nonverbal responses and disruptions during the interview. Audio recordings, field notes, and transcripts are stored on a separate hard drive, not on a university server. Recordings will be kept for two years. My advisor and I are the only two people with access to this information.

Interview Guide. The guide did not change throughout the interviews and as the project⁶⁰ developed. Interview guide questions (see Appendix A) were used to organize the questions around the Four C's of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture, and connection (Bauer, 2010), with specific focus on culture and connection, and how the new employees established the “vital interpersonal relationships and information networks” (Bauer, 2010, p. 2). The questions came from Amey et al. (2015) in the context of student support professionals taking “an organizational analysis approach to their professional transition” (p. 36). In preparation for research, conversations with new employees, not specific to student support professionals, affirmed the questions in the interview guide (Bauer, 2010).

In following ethical protocol and quality interview criteria (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009), the interview guide contained lists of questions/topics around the onboarding experience (see Appendix A). The questions were in a planned order, with the flexibility to adjust during the 45-60-minute interview. Questions evolved from simple rapport to specific questions around the onboarding building blocks of connection and culture. Main points were included, with possible probes under each one. Adjustments were made and probing questions were asked if there was more to be learned, based on something the participant said. This included “asking for more details, for clarification, for examples” (Merriam, 2009, p. 101) throughout the interview to seek more detail about participants' experiences. Follow up questions were asked for clarity and certainty of what was heard. A technical aspect of the interview process was reactivity.

In review of the transcriptions and in preparation for each interview, I looked for missed opportunities for probing or follow up questions. Verifying, or member checking, occurred throughout the interviews as interpretations were verified through active listening techniques. Member checking is a way to rule out misinterpretation (Maxwell, 2005). Each person was

interviewed once and there was no need for subsequent contacts for clarification.

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The research was approached with mindful recording in order to make sense of the data (Tracy, 2013). Field notes—handwritten jottings of observations and reflections—were an important part of the process, alongside the audio recording and transcription process. Although the transcript was the most important instrument of the process, the brief notes helped to capture information such as body language of the participant, engagement level, and environmental nuances that add to the interview outcomes. The success of the field notes, or jottings, depended on my commitment to be “passionate, generous, diligent, disciplined, and curious, and likely the data will become richer and the field more giving in return” (Tracy, 2013, p. 127).

Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify, analyze and report patterns or themes of meaning, within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Through this inductive, comparative, and iterative process, included an analysis of “key features of a large body of data, and/or offer a ‘thick description’ of the data set” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 37). Reflection throughout the process allowed an exploration of what participants think, feel, and do (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Identification of emergent themes led to higher level of conceptualization and theorization. This emergent design makes qualitative research unique.

In order to make sense of the information collected, a process was followed to ensure nothing relevant was missed. Following a process helped to remain open and objective. This structured process is summarized in six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006):

1. Familiarizing yourself with data
2. Generating initial codes
3. Searching for themes

4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Producing the report

Transcription served as one of the earliest stages of analysis and understanding of the data. From the start, notes were taken, and ideas were marked for coding. Codes were affixed to transcriptions drawn from observations and interviews. Reflections and other remarks were noted in the margins. The meaning of what interviewees described was condensed and interpreted. Patterns of themes across the dataset of transcribed interviews were sought, through data coding, in order to answer the question of how student support professionals experience onboarding.

Transcripts were uploaded into NVIVO 12, the analysis software program used to explore and code. I was also able to query key words for comparison with coded categories, called nodes, and themes. Nodes are containers that hold all the content about the theme. The software helped to sort to find word frequencies and sort through date. Data consisted of transcribed interviews, jottings, and research memos. I was immersed in the data in order to understand the depth and breadth of content (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Through the data compilation, materials were sorted and sifted through to identify similar phrases; relationships between variables, patterns, themes; distinct differences between subgroups; and common sequences. The first level, or the descriptive level, was looked at, to discover what was in the text (Punch, 2014). Coding eventually pointed to themes, which once analyzed, created an overall concept. As patterns and processes were isolated, commonalities and differences (Miles & Huberman, 1994) emerged. Generalizations were interpreted through formalized bodies of knowledge in the form of constructs or theories, most notably socialization, sensemaking, and onboarding.

During data collection, peer debriefing (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) was used in order to discuss emerging themes and to test out findings with the major advisor. This process challenged a broader thought process about the findings as research progressed. The research process was audited through research memos and through tracked developing thoughts.

Transparent methods increased strength in the findings and ultimately provided an understanding of conclusions arrived at.

During interviews and coding, a separate notebook was kept and ideas were recorded as text was read and the text of the interviews was considered. “The structure of the data, the categories and codes, emerged from the data, during the analysis” (Punch, 2014, p. 30).

Memoing began at the start of analysis and occurred throughout the process.

A memo is a theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding ... it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages ... it exhausts the analyst’s momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration. (Miles and Huberman, 1994, p. 72)

The conceptual content was the most important part of the memo (Punch, 2014). Relationships within the pieces of coded text were found and new patterns or relationships between concepts were sought (Glaser, 1978; Miles & Huberman, 1994). Continual work with the text of the descriptive codes led to continued refinement of sorting and analysis.

The audit of the study included an analytical component in order to see where I had been and where I was going. The different pieces in the coding were compared, in order to identify abstract concepts from the data (Punch, 2014). Constant and systematic comparisons were necessary in the process of arriving at broad concepts through all levels of data analysis (Punch, 2014). Comparison is the “central intellectual activity in analysis” (Tesch, 1990).

The research process was audited through research memos and notes of developing thoughts. The goal was to create “a good fit between what you claim you do, and what you show you have done—i.e. described method and reported analysis are consistent” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 36). It was mainly a part of preserving the quality of the research and analysis processes (Punch, 2014). Once data was analyzed, the process led to higher levels of conceptualization about the data through patterns or interpretation of the coding. The study was not finished until this occurred. The analysis changed throughout the study from descriptive, to more conceptual, to ultimately more theoretical (Punch, 2014).

Data and Study Quality

Qualitative research was the best approach for this study, in order to understand how student support professionals experience onboarding. The phenomenon was studied holistically and in detail (Punch, 2014). This study took a two-pronged approach to quality control of the data: procedures in the collection of the data and technical aspects of the quality of data: credibility, transferability and dependability (Punch, 2014). This refers to data analysis as well, as transcribing, memoing, and coding is done to break data down into manageable segments, allowing quick access to data, as a procedure in the collection. A commonsense approach in the data collection procedures included careful and thorough anticipation, planning, and preparation (Punch, 2014).

This interview study, with semi-structured interviews, required standards. Once data was collected, an evaluation occurred, regarding how well the data gathering was done. The six quality criteria for an interview: “rich, specific, relevant answers from the interviewee, short questions from interviewer, longer interviewee answers, meaning clarification and follow up of answers, interview interpreted throughout the interview, and interview is a “self-reported,” self-

reliant story that hardly requires additional explanations” (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009, p. 164). 65

Interpretations were verified throughout the interview and created the experience of a “self-reported” interview.

Guba and Lincoln (1989) point to the meaningful criteria of credibility, dependability, and transferability in research studies. Credibility and transferability were solidified by proving the participants had newcomer experiences to share as I studied the phenomenon (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Participant quotes were used to identify themes and ultimately support the results of the study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). Validity refers to accuracy or correctness of the research findings. The internal validity includes the credibility criterion, consistency necessary in the study, the threats to internal validity and how threats are answered. The internal validity refers to the “internal logic and consistency of the research” (Punch, 2014, p. 315). The external validity refers to the how far the findings of this study can be generalized or transferred (Punch, 2014). I was able to better understand the content of interviews and the intention of participants through the transcription and coding.

Credibility

Credibility is the criterion focused on establishing a match between the constructed realities of participants and the realities the researcher represented (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Several techniques increased the probability of this match occurring. Prolonged engagement occurred conversation with participants, face-to-face, at the higher education institutions, in order to be fully immersed in the surroundings of the context. Findings were tested out through peer debriefing with the major advisor. A “developing construction” was monitored through memoing, as described earlier so construction could not “be given privilege over that of anyone else” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 238).

Member checks describe the continuous process of checking with participants who provide the data. This occurred during the interview and analysis stages of research. This match verification, between what was presented as constructed realities of the participants and the constructed realities they provided, is the “single most crucial technique for establishing credibility” (Lincoln & Guba, 1989, p. 239). This “gives the respondent a chance to judge overall adequacy of the interview itself and in addition to confirm individual data items” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Questions were asked and it was confirmed what was heard during the interview. Any data with participants that was unclear was confirmed. During analysis, developing concepts could have been taken back to participants for confirmation, validation, and verification (Punch, 2014). I did not find any concepts that were unclear to me.

Transferability

Transferability in qualitative research happens through mechanisms, which differ from quantitative research. External validity refers to the generalizability and transferability of the study findings. The findings may be generalized, with broad claims to student support professionals, with an adherence to a diverse sampling, a context thickly described, and the level of abstraction of the concepts with the data analysis (Punch, 2014). The participant sample was a variety of student support professionals within four-year public institutions in a Midwest state system. The qualitative research sacrificed quantity in terms of number of participants, however, the payback was shown in depth. Rich, thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973) of the onboarding experience and the context in which it took place were gathered and provided to enable the reader to “judge the transferability of findings to other situations” (Punch, 2014, p. 316). The reader applies transferability. By studying this particular phenomenon, readers may learn something relevant and make connections to their own onboarding experiences. The onboarding

practices described may contribute to future understanding and application to other people in other places, beyond the scope of this study. I used the following questions from Miles and Huberman (1994) in final analysis of the study quality: 67

1. Are the findings congruent with, connected to, or confirmatory of prior theory?
2. Does the report suggest settings where the findings could be tested further?
3. Have similar findings been discovered in other studies? (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 279).

These questions will be used in my overall conclusions in reflection of what I have learned.

Dependability

A reflective journal was kept in order to strengthen the dependability of the emergent research design. Findings were stated precisely and accurately to ensure the study is trustworthy (Booth, 2008). My own constructions were acknowledged throughout the process in order to reduce biases or prejudices (Lincoln & Guba, 1989).

Human Subject Approval: Institutional Review Board (IRB)

Research was approved by the St. Cloud State University IRB Committee in order to protect the confidentiality of participants, reduce risks, and insure informed consent, following the St. Cloud State University website protocol. Approval was obtained prior to interviewing and collecting data. A proposal was submitted, which included IRB training, a completed application, copies of data collection instruments, copies of consent forms, copies of written support, and copies of the debriefing statement. Once approved, the research process and the consent process with participants were followed.

Procedures and Timeline

I presented in front of the committee at the dissertation proposal meeting in August 2019. From that meeting, I made the suggested revisions to the first three chapters. At that time, I

submitted my application for IRB approval, which followed St. Cloud State University's handbook guidelines. Once IRB approval was received from St. Cloud State IRB, in September 2019, participants were contacted and selected. Interviews began at that time and were collected, transcribed, analyzed, verified and reported data. Interviews took place during the months of October 2019, January 2020, and February 2020. Interviews averaged one hour in length. I gathered data throughout the interview process and began drawing conclusions the spring of 2020.

Summary

This chapter included a description of the research design, participant selection, data collection, analysis procedures, and data quality measures. The research questions grounded in the Four C's of onboarding (Bauer & Erdogan, 2014) will contribute specifically to higher education professionals in human resources and student support. This will help to broaden the understanding of onboarding in higher education and contribute to literature regarding the onboarding experience of student support professionals in higher education. Through thematic analysis, this interview study with semi-structured interviews will help to understand how student support professionals experience onboarding.

Chapter Four include findings for each research question, a synthesis discussion of the research to obtain a fuller understanding of how student support professionals experience onboarding, aspects of the outcomes, categorized findings with previous studies, and aspects that need further investigation. Chapter Five includes overall conclusions from the research, and a reflection of what has been learned. The chapter also includes interpretations of the findings and why they are important. The problems encountered in the study, as well as recommendations for further research will be included. Finally, the chapter will include recommendations to the field

of higher education regarding the onboarding experience. Future research topics will be identified in order to build upon this study.

I conducted a qualitative study to investigate how student support professionals experience onboarding. This research was designed to add to the existing body of knowledge on the subject of onboarding employees in higher education, enhance existing research, and provide new knowledge and understanding about the onboarding experience. Three conceptual frameworks provided a foundation to this study: onboarding, socialization and sensemaking. These frameworks each contain processes which spiral within one another.

Theoretical Framework: Bauer's Four C's Onboarding Levels

Within the conceptual framework of onboarding, I examined the four levels, or Four C's, of onboarding: compliance, clarification, culture and connection (Bauer, 2010). A common theme throughout the onboarding experience is the relationship between the organization and the newcomer. The newcomer moves from an organizational outsider to an organizational insider (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011) through the socialization processes of expectation, knowledge and belonging. Sensemaking provides a structure to examine how the individual interprets and makes meaning from the onboarding and socialization experiences. I asked questions in order to identify sensemaking inputs such as others' interpretations, local interpretation schemes, predispositions and purposes, and past experiences (Louis, 1980). These broad processes and experiences continuously spiral and connect as the new employees and the systems of the organization intersect, in either organic or intentional ways. In order to better understand the onboarding experience, I investigated the following research questions:

1. How do student support professionals experience onboarding?
2. How do student support professional make connections through the onboarding process?

3. How do student support professionals understand the culture of the institution through the onboarding process?

In order to answer these questions, I interviewed 10 participants representing nine departments within student support at four-year public institutions in a Midwestern state. This chapter is organized by connecting study findings around each of the three research questions which includes: interpretations, participant responses, a comparison to data from the literature review and summary analysis. The results are presented as quotations from participants, arranged around the Four C's (Bauer, 2010) and how the analysis ties back to the study's three research questions.

Question 1: How do Student Support Professionals Experience Onboarding?

In this section, I discuss findings related to my first research question. This question points broadly to the Four C's (Bauer, 2010) and the responses most specifically regarding compliance and clarification. The majority of participants experienced passive onboarding, Bauer's (2010) level 1, which included the compliance building block, some clarification, little to none of the culture and connections building blocks. In many ways, this seemed more like an orientation than an onboarding experience for all ten participants. None of the participants described a proactive onboarding experience, Bauer's (2010) onboarding strategy level 3, in which all four C's were addressed. This section focuses on the broadest emerging themes around the onboarding experience, more specifically, the first two building blocks of onboarding: compliance and clarification.

Before discussing the compliance and clarification experiences, two themes are worth mentioning as part of the socialization process, upon entry into the participants' institutions. The socialization process is an examination of the relationship between the employee and the organization. All participants in the study were provided informal socialization experiences, meaning the newcomers became part of work groups immediately and learned on-the-job

(Gruman, et al, 2006). The three stages of socialization are: anticipation (expectation), encounter⁷² (knowledge), and settling in (belonging; Noe, 2005). Expectation was an emerging theme, as the newcomers' previous institution or work experience was the most referenced topic throughout the data. Whether or not the newcomer felt welcomed was another theme that was broadly mentioned as part of the onboarding experience.

Expectations

Expectations of the organization and the job are developed prior to organizational entry. Eight of the ten newcomers had different expectations, largely based on their experiences at previous institutions or organizations. There were over 100 references provided during the interviews related to previous institution or work experiences. Some newcomers mentioned the formal educational experiences their previous institutions provided, such as online training.

Many of the expectations the participants shared were not experienced in the new organization. While Ally's onboarding experiences had varied, her previous role required very specific training and onboarding, and she expected the same in her new job. Her expectations were not met at her new institution. She acknowledged that each institution is organized differently and that most times there was a training process. She came from another state university system. Although Ally was dissatisfied with the lack of training or onboarding at her current institution, she was thankful for the ability to pick out a computer and work with human resources as needed.

Brenda's expectations as a newcomer were formed largely from a position outside of higher education. She experienced very structured orientation practices in healthcare.

I was a little surprised, I think, that it wasn't as structured here. I had a very structured orientation there with HR and different things. And then even before I trained in my

department, I had a two-hour orientation or something within the organization. Maybe it ⁷³ was even longer than that. And I kind of thought there would be something more structured here, but there wasn't really. I mean, there was a checklist and I had to go to HR and go over certain things. I came in that day thinking there was going to be more to that. It was more after my first day during that first week...I think during the first day I actually did go up and meet with HR for about an hour and filled out some paperwork and stuff. But I had just thought there would be maybe more like, "This is your introduction to the institution," and there wasn't really that. There were some other things I did over time, too, like I had to watch certain videos about different things like...I can't even remember what they were...I think there was something about compliance and discrimination or sexual harassment, that kind of stuff. Different modules I had to read and go through online. So those were kind of sent out to me piecemeal.

Since Brenda's expectations were based on onboarding experiences outside of higher education, she expected a much more structured, intentional experience and an introduction to the institution, beyond training videos.

Karen's expectations were also unmet as she also had a different onboarding experience in comparison to her previous institution:

When I started at my previous institution, it was super thorough, super detailed. My first two days here, all I did was go on the institution's website and like look up information so that I felt knowledgeable to even be sitting in my office. When I worked at my previous institution, that was part of my onboarding process was to sit down and meet with the head of tutoring, the head of financial aid, the head of academic advising. And then when I got here, like I said, because it was already mid-semester, people were out

Karen's expectations were centered around her previous experience of learning first about the institution through the website, then through intentional connections and meeting others through structured processes.

Shani's expectations of her onboarding experience were based entirely on her experience at her previous institution.

I didn't have a real true onboarding experience, compared to what my onboarding was when I started at my previous institution, which spanned over a week or two. Not every single day, and it was not your typical HR stuff, but it was things to do with the mission and historical stuff with the school and how your employment would tie into the mission as well. So, we got four days a year paid mission leave. So, in that onboarding it was a lot about what that means. Your contribution based on their values.

Expectation of a workplace introduction may include themes of institutional culture, mission, and service. A proactive onboarding strategy includes culture in onboarding activities.

Summary of Expectations. Expectations played an important role in the newcomer experience. Participants easily identified and reflected on their current expectations in comparison to their past experiences. Participants' expectations included: onboarding specific to the position, the level of independence in the role, an introduction to the workplace, assistance in connecting with others, and a training manual. Some expectations came from experiences outside of higher education. Most newcomers expected an intentional institutional onboarding process. Within the intentional process, one newcomer also expected an onboarding experience focused on culture, mission, and service.

Newcomers developed expectations about the institution and the job through interactions

with their managers. This sensemaking process evolved from the newcomers' past experiences, 75 expectations of the new institution because of past experiences, what they learned early on about the new institution, and whether or not expectations were met at the new institution. Newcomers expected an opportunity for connections to be made, to learn about the institution's culture and mission through an intentional introduction to the institution, to have an opportunity to get further involved, and finally, the level of independence in the role, even as specific as scheduling within one's area.

Newcomers' unmet expectations had consequences in terms of socialization and satisfaction. Social integration is an important part of a successful onboarding experience. When newcomers meet or work with insiders of the organization, they begin to feel socially comfortable and accepted. Acceptance by peers is an indicator of adjustment (Bauer, & Green, 1998). The newcomers in this study expected to meet and work with others early on. Some did not experience that social support and adjustment to their work. Krista experienced very few coworkers with her on campus but had an informal mentor who supported her and guided her in her introductions and work.

Satisfaction was also impacted due to unmet expectations. Unmet expectations led to dissatisfaction and disappointment in the onboarding process. A meta-analytic review of antecedents, outcomes and methods found onboarding can lead to higher job satisfaction, organization commitment, lower turnover, higher performance levels, career effectiveness and lowered stress (Bauer et al., (2007).

Feeling Welcomed

Once new employees are hired, it is up to the institution to make a positive first impression. Peak moments (Heath and Heath, 2017) were described as an organizational

investment to create special moments on the newcomer's first day. Simple examples such as 76
lunch with a team member, or a trinket on the desk with institutional history or meaning, are
examples of an intentional welcome effort. These efforts are meant to improve the newcomer
experience. Evidence of engagement, retention and loyalty were found in a study which focused
on the importance of paying attention to the moments that mean something (Peake, 2017). In this
study, four newcomers found their first days to be very welcoming while six newcomers found
their first days to be unwelcoming.

Heather felt welcomed immediately. She was introduced as a new hire via email two
months before she arrived on campus. Upon her arrival, Heather's supervisor walked her around
campus for introductions. She was greeted with warm responses that indicated other employees
remembered the email introduction. Heather shared details regarding her supervisor's intentional
efforts: "There was a big welcome sign on my door that everybody had signed, and she had a
breakfast all planned out so that everybody was there to welcome me." She found her campus
welcome to be very positive even though her overall onboarding experience was not positive.

Matt was welcomed and introduced to his institution in a unique way. Due to his summer
start date, he was able to live on campus for a short while. This allowed him to meet students and
employees in different phases as they arrived on campus for fall semester. Ally felt welcomed by
her unit. She completed some of the onboarding aspects online, picked out her computer and
discussed her office location on campus. Finally, Eric felt welcomed as a newcomer, mainly due
to his familiarity with the campus and the community.

Feeling Unwelcomed

In contrast, six of the newcomers did not feel welcomed. The newcomers who paused to
reflect on the welcome and how they were introduced showed an immediate passionate response,

one of disappointment. When asked about it, Shani forcefully sat up and burst out a description of⁷⁷ her newcomer experience:

My first few days were, what's the word? Terrible. Very unwelcoming. It was a shockingly different culture from what I came from. For instance, you're trying to set up your computer on your first few days. IT had emailed me about something, and something wasn't working. So, I replied to that email and said, "Hey, this is whatever isn't working, can you help me with that?" And within a matter of probably 10 minutes, the office manager shot around the corner with my boss, and it was, "Did you email IT? And I'm like, "yeah." You know, "Don't do that."

Shani had no idea she had made an error. Intentional compliance and clarification stages of onboarding would have helped her navigate this situation with her computer.

Mary gave an example of how unwelcoming it felt to receive apparel information and clothing or dress expectations at the last minute. She was not told she was required to purchase branded apparel before her first day on the job. This added to the stress of being new to the institution and understanding what was required for the job. Newcomers expect to feel a sense of belonging within the organization. She recounted those feelings immediately. Again, making Mary feel welcome through thorough communication would have reduced Mary's stress and made her feel a sense of belonging, wearing the correct apparel.

Krista believed the absence of other employees and activity on campus during her first two months made her feel unwelcomed and isolated:

It was summertime, so the faculty was gone, so I kind of just met people piecemeal, that way. There also were not a lot of regular meetings, as you know, during the summer. I just kind of went out and met people that I thought I needed to know.

When the newcomer's arrival timing is unique, the institution and department have to be even 78 more intentional about connections and culture. Feeling welcomed through connections is an important part of the proactive onboarding strategy. Starting at a time when a majority of the staff was absent made it difficult for Krista to make connections and experience the energy of the institution. She also had a strong response to the institution's role in welcoming her:

It's horrendous here. It's awful. Everyone would say that. It's awful. I think my aha moment was, like two weeks in, I think. Certainly, after the first week. I got some kind of PowerPoint from HR that I had to watch. And then there were a lot of videos that I had to watch. And I read through the PowerPoint, and I thought, "Good golly, why did I not get this the very first day?" It answered so many questions. I'm like, "Oh that's the different between one ID and another ID. Oh, that's how you... Oh, that's why that happened. And I'm like, "Why was that not the first thing that I encountered?" It absolutely should have been. And I don't know if it was because I wasn't hired in the fall. It was kind of an odd time. I don't know if there's a more, I want to say, rational more organized approach. I don't know if it's because I'm not faculty. Maybe they do a whole shebang for faculty, and I'm just staff. I don't know. But they have been virtually non-existent. And so, I would say what is unique, and I don't know if it was unique just to the college or if it's unique to the university, but HR was completely non-existent. And the Dean just kind of left it to the department.

With intentional onboarding steps of compliance, clarification and connection, Krista's experience should have been far more structured and complete. Knowing there are most likely going to be training videos involved, early training would have solved early questions. This type of experience did not make her feel welcomed. It felt like the institution was unprepared for

Megan felt unwelcomed to her new institution. She drew a parallel to the student experience in describing her own introduction to campus:

I would not have made it. And I care a lot about orientation and supporting students through transition and helping them find community. And so, it's been interesting to do that, but not quite have figured everything out for myself. In a lot of ways, it's helped me identify with what students are going through.

Megan was able to see her own experience as related to the student experience. She was not welcomed well or onboarded well.

In each of these cases, the newcomers would have benefited from the proactive onboarding strategy level, which includes the first three C's. They would have known more within their roles through compliance and clarification and felt more welcomed due to the connections.

Summary of the Welcome. Based on these examples, onboarding is partly dependent on immediate supervisors, human resources, and fellow employees. Supervisors can welcome newcomers and help them understand their roles and duties, but also serve as ambassadors of the institution. Human resources can welcome newcomers and affirm their desire to gather details and information regarding their new position. Fellow employees can welcome newcomers and share some frontline tips in the first few days to make the newcomer's transition smoother.

The lack of a systemic approach to onboarding is prevalent in many of the participants' experiences. Making a newcomer feel welcomed is not as much about the trinkets on the desk, but rather providing early connections with others and demonstrating to the newcomer that they are a welcomed addition to the team and to the organization. It is a demonstration of the

organization's desire to ensure the newcomer is equipped with basic necessities, such as a desk, 80 computer, phone and possibly a uniform. Much of that preparation can take place before the newcomer arrives and computer and video exercises make this easier to include in the onboarding experience. The expectations that newcomers bring with them may include the type of welcome they have experienced in previous roles and organizations.

Summary of Onboarding Experiences. Newcomers in this study valued any efforts by the institutions or representatives to make the newcomer experience positive. Examples of those efforts included mail introductions, welcome signs, in-person introductions, temporary housing options, and prepared equipment. Six participants felt unwelcomed due to a "lack of communication about" expectations such as dress code or communication protocol. Entry timing was positive in terms of Matt's experience with a slow, phased start, and negative in terms of Krista's summer start, with unit members absent during her introduction to the institution. Expectations played a critical role in the newcomer experience. Brenda's onboarding expectations were formed through experiences outside of higher education. Matt and Ally had much more thorough onboarding experiences at previous institutions, which they compared to their current institution. There was also a broad expectation from newcomers that they would make connections in the first few days, which was not facilitated at their new institutions.

Compliance

Compliance is the term used to describe the most basic building block of onboarding. Compliance is expected by the newcomer and the organization. It includes teaching employees basic legal and policy-related rules and regulations. This section identifies a variety of themes within the building block of compliance: paperwork, phone, timing, policy, and parking.

Paperwork. Paperwork is one of the most common compliance activities newcomers 81

experienced as part of the onboarding process. In some cases, paperwork can be completed before the first day, which allows for more time to make connections and get settled into the workplace. Matt shared that his paperwork was done rather quickly due to his start date the next business day. Heather needed more information than what had been provided to her initially. She could have used more time to ask questions and gain better understanding:

I mean I did have a sit down with HR and they did go through the basics of like, “This is your insurance and blah, blah, blah, blah.” Yes, that they did. Now, I’m still tripping over stuff that they didn’t explain accurately or well enough.

Krista was frustrated with her paperwork experience as well. She had everything but her ID and log-in numbers:

And so, the first few weeks ... the boss there was very, very organized. She had a lot of papers for me to read, knowing that the HR piece of it would take a little while to catch up. That was a little frustrating, not having all the numbers that you needed.

Mary’s frustration was centered around paperwork and the lack of training which caused her to do the paperwork over again in some cases:

And a lot of times I had to ask other people what I was supposed to be doing or what I needed because I never really got any training on it. A lot of it tends to be a co-worker, ‘Hey, I just realized I used my tax-exempt number, and you probably don’t know what that is’. And I was like, nope. And I didn’t know we had one of those, you know, or I would fill mine out first. I had to have somebody show me how to do my credit card statement, and then I would turn it in and then they’d be like, you weren’t supposed to do such and such a thing. I was like, what?

Brenda was initially pleased with the paperwork and information provided her in a binder, “a lot of general information, written information about financial aid and some of the things that they, from experience, knew that would be helpful for me to know.” What frustrated her, as a newcomer, was the special trip she made to the HR office to complete paperwork ahead of time, only to learn she didn’t need to make the trip.

I wanted to get all that stuff taken care of, so actually I took a day or a morning off of work on my last job, so I could be here during the business day and do those things. But then I found out, like when I showed up at HR, they wanted me to turn in my I-9, I think, before or something. He’s like, “Oh, you didn’t actually have to come in before” but the paperwork that I had stated that I needed to, so I came here especially for that.

They took the paperwork and said, “It’s fine that you’re here, but you didn’t really have to come here” I’m like, “Well, I was going to come to buy a parking pass, because I park on city parking.” Eventually, Brenda still had to do some more paperwork with HR, due to retirement plan changes. Her disappointment in HR’s response to her arriving in person to take care of paperwork was very evident during the interview.

Paperwork Summary. Paperwork was a frustration to the newcomers and took away from what they expected to be positive experiences with their new institution. Paperwork typically would not be mentioned as part of the compliance stage since it is a mundane necessity. Instead, paperwork was neither an orientation nor an onboarding process, but rather a sub-level passive theme throughout the interviews. While the newcomers sought to understand the behavior of HR, it was not seen as a positive newcomer experience. The simplest steps of welcoming a newcomer into the institution were not done in a manner that helped the newcomer feel welcomed.

involved with bringing the newcomer into the institution. This step covers details such as email logins, computer passwords and other company tools needed for the job. In this study, three newcomers shared that their institutions did not provide clear instructions on how the phone was to be used in the newcomer's role. Expectations were not set, and it made it difficult for the newcomers to understand their new roles without adequate instruction about cell phone usage and general phone operations.

Shani sat up in her chair to explain how she learned about cell phones in the office:

You're communicated things. For instance, if somebody was on their cell phone, apparently somebody told...I cannot believe I'm saying this story right now, I just have to. But then we get an email, the whole office...somebody must've been on their cell phone, so the office was sent an email... "I encourage you to make sure that you're using your time wisely," with the article attached to it on cellular devices and learning. And the article was actually written about undergraduate classroom learning and obviously the distraction, so very conflict-avoidant, but creating conflict as well. So that's how...

There's nothing really expressed explicitly in regard to, "This is what we do, this is why we do so."

Shani's experience was informal, or reactive, communication. In understanding her role and learning the department processes, she was struck by a broad communication of reprimand with no training or basis for her as a newcomer.

Karen experienced a sense of urgency regarding her phone, "we need to try and get you your cell phone right away." This was in addition to ordering a name tag and business cards. "It wasn't like, 'welcome, this is the thing you should do now that you are here.' When I started at

my previous institution, it was super thorough, super detailed. Karen's experience felt more mechanical and rushed. 84

Ally was not impressed with the lack of training. She believed the lack of training on her phone led to less efficiency in her role. She took personal responsibility to figure the phone out:

I had a telephone when I came, part of my onboarding, "Here's your phone" How do I use it? I don't know how to dial to get out. How do I set my voicemail? I had to go ask that. The admin did give me the "sorry, dial whatever to get out, do..." Whatever, but when I wanted to know, okay, how do I set my voicemail? What if I want to transfer call? What if I want to make a conference call? What is all the little things? I went to the people who do the phone and she said, "I think if you YouTube it, you'll find some great information." Ask me, do I know yet how to conference call or transfers? I can answer and I can call. There are people I can ask; I just don't take the time.

Ally did not receive training or clarification during the compliance stage of her experience. This led to inefficiencies in her work. It was her responsibility to figure out her phone. This affected her early job performance and disconnected her from an early sense of belonging. She was asked to figure it out herself.

Phone Summary. These four examples pertain to the onboarding stage of compliance specific to phone usage. Newcomers did not get the information they needed to do their job, nor were they welcomed warmly with a list of items they needed to know. They were not provided an instruction manual or guidance on phone usage. This impacted their job performance to some degree. Intentional phone instructions were not provided.

Timing. Entry timing had an effect on the newcomer's experience. Six of the ten participants shared their feeling that timing affected their entry experiences. They each had their

own quick start. Matt had no paperwork. Eric had no job description. Karen and Mary had no 85
time to react as they had campus events and then were on the road. Krista had no one around
since faculty in her area didn't return to campus until late summer – long after she started in her
job. Newcomers' timing and schedules were often unnegotiable. The rapid start in their positions
caused frustration and negated some of the typical compliance and connection tasks. The
newcomer typically seeks knowledge and understanding while the manager shows support for
the newcomer.

Mary experienced a fast-paced start and had to get on the road for recruiting immediately,
“We do orientation in our office, by that time it's over, you're almost essentially on the road. So,
they'd already planned all the places that I was going to go for my college fairs at the beginning,
which was fine.” Megan had a rapid start to her schedule as well, as students arrived on campus
two days after she started. She shared a few things that a fast-paced schedule made more difficult
to navigate as a newcomer:

Not only knowing my office location and people's names, but also being taken seriously
as a leader. It was a lot. And we have a group of faculty advisors that help with that
program, too. So, that part was also a bit intimidating, for me, because students are one
thing, that's what I'm comfortable with, but being on day three and having to teach
faculty stuff was a learning experience for sure. I mean I'm still putting it together. I don't
know if anyone's ever done putting together how an institution works. But just like really
feeling like I could explain how we're structured and all the pieces that are involved. That
took me until after the summer, which was kind of a strange thing because in orientation,
I'm the person who introduces other people to it. So, trying to figure it out and do that at
the same time.

Megan's experience did not support her confidence in her job performance or feeling a sense of 86 belonging. Feeling rushed and learning names and details on the job was not ideal.

Karen questioned her timing in the fact that there were very few colleagues in her unit available:

So, I was a little skeptical at first. It took some time to kind of grow into things. I started in the middle of travel season, so it was a little rough in that aspect. There weren't a lot of other counselors in the office to kind of show me the ropes.

Newcomers who arrive at the institution at unique times have less opportunity to grow connections learn their roles with fewer insiders available on campus.

As time went on, Krista reflected that different groups coming together caused a bit of dissonance that she had not anticipated as a newcomer:

The tension between the two groups of staff became very clear from the first department meetings. I worked this summer with one half, and then when the other half came back in the fall, it was like, "Whoa, Oh, Oh." You know? There was a little pushback or a little surprise, but I think we've been able to overcome some of those things at least. Just through talking and being more open, and this is why, this is the thought process behind it. Because one shared value we probably have is doing what's best for the students, if they can at least see. "Well, this why I thought that was what was best for the students" and "This is what I thought was best for the students." Oh, okay. Well, now at least I understand where you were coming from.

Krista described the experience was an opportunity for her to be involved in conversations and being more open, in order to understand the transition between working with a smaller summer staff to working with a full team of department faculty and staff. It was not until further

conversation uncovered that notion that Krista felt she had more understanding of what she had 87 experienced. Her coworkers' overall commitment to the student and doing what was best for students required further discussion.

Krista also considered if a traditional hiring timeframe would be closer to fall, "And I don't know if it was because I wasn't hired in the fall. It was kind of an odd time." Mary was hired at the time her unit was in full swing:

I was hired like two days before (orientation) started. I think I, maybe had one day in the office and then the very next day was registration. So, I definitely had like a trial by fire experience....people were like, can I ask you a question? And I was like, sure. And they would ask me, let me go and ask someone else, because I didn't know the answers. So, it was an adventure.

Other newcomers had a completely different experience and found their timing to be extremely positive. Matt saw his starting timing as beneficial. It allowed him to gradually adjust to his new duties.

I like how it built up like to where I just had one football group and then the second session, I had two football groups and then a little bit more and then it got closer to the school year, and I started getting more teams. It kind of built up, instead of if I had come in mid-year, like at the start of the winter semester, and I just suddenly had 18 teams to train like right away. That might've been a lot. This has been pretty good. Like just kind of one thing at a time building up on top of each other.

Matt was thankful to have started in the summer, with just one group of student athletes in the morning, the rest of the time he could look for housing and take care of the gym in the limited hours. The summer start time also gave him a chance to get settled. He saw that as a positive for

Timing Summary. Newcomer entry timing is an important part of the overall onboarding experience. Participants shared both positive and negative responses to their entry timing, based on expectations and experiences. A fast start with little structure, arriving when others were still gone for the summer, or an entry timing that provided a phased approach for serving students as they arrived, were all part of the newcomer experience. While some found a slower start in the summer helpful to ease into the job, others found it hid the full aspects of the job. Those who had to dive into the work found this timing stressful since there was no one to show them around. Both experiences reflect either the cost of not intentionally planning or the benefit of being able to plan for new staff start dates in order to make the newcomer introduction less stressful.

Policy. Policy emerged as a theme when participants were asked about their newcomer experience. The compliance stage, the lowest level of the Four C's is where newcomers learn basic policy-related rules and regulations. This is an important part of both the informal and formal socialization processes, where newcomers immediately became part of workgroups and began to learn on-the-job or they are isolated from other members of the organization while they learn their roles (Gruman, et al, 2006).

The role of the supervisor is important in understanding the newcomer adjustment process related to policy. Bauer and Green (1998) found two approaches in newcomers acquiring knowledge: newcomer's information seeking behavior and manager behavior toward the newcomer. This study revealed newcomers' information seeking behavior, specifically as they learned policies, while on the job.

The first example is Brenda's reflection on her role being tied to federal policies. She sought out the information as a newcomer, but also needed input from her director:

There are certain gray areas within federal financial aid policies. But you want to make 89
sure you're within the spirit of the policy. So, when we're questioning that, we like to get
the director's input because he is ultimately responsible for the department.

Brenda was invited to take early responsibility to update forms which held policies for
students.

In seeking her own clarification, she was also given instruction to revise forms as she wished: "I
redid some of the forms because my supervisor said, 'These forms are yours, so if you find
anything that you want to change with them or to make them better, we can actually do that.'"

Brenda was seeking clarity in her role yet was asked to be a part of creating revisions as a
newcomer. This experience was not shared by other newcomers. It is not part of any onboarding
strategy, but rather an example of an institution lacking structure in one example, asking the
newcomer to create the structure.

Karen found her unit's policies related to hourly schedules to be extremely frustrating
and time consuming:

One of the biggest things that my office is going through is the change in our hours and
our scheduling. So honestly, that was one of the most important things when I first started.
We had just gone through that switch of going from salary to hourly. And so, we went
from, you have all the time in the world to do your work to 'you've got to get it done in 40
hours.' We have to be flexing time or taking time off. You have to report it in a certain way
or HR and Business Services get upset. It's just very meticulous and time-consuming work.

It was, and is impacting me, obviously one of the most important things I have to deal with.
In this example, a policy around time reporting was frustrating to the newcomer. In seeking
clarification, the newcomer had to adjust quickly to an institutional policy. This policy change led

to a negative experience for the newcomer.

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In reflection of her first days on the job, Krista referenced policies as a main focus and an opportunity to seek information in order to understand her role.

Because of the nature of the job, there were a lot of policies. In the fall we had these advisory kinds of meetings and forums. That was a place where at least with procedural issues, or new policies, or confusion over policies, that we can voice concerns and talk. The meetings and forums were not explicitly onboarding, but they were opportunities for the new employee to learn about the job along with everyone else doing it.

Shani's overall reflection was that policies in her office were outdated:

Decisions in my office? They're made by old policies, and a lot of things on my office's side, decisions are made through the director. And then I really make a lot of my own decisions in how I'm navigating my own work, particularly with nobody wanting to touch my office and nobody knows how to do it.

Shani did not consider her autonomy in decision making a positive attribute, but rather a symbol of the lack of cohesion and direction as she sought to acquire information regarding policies. There was little manager involvement to provide policy guidance.

Summary of Policy. Newcomers sought policy information through the compliance stage of the Four C's of onboarding. Newcomers observed managers' behaviors. These examples were parallel to Bauer and Green's (1998) study which showed socialization, newcomer performance and manager behavior influenced one another over time and are continuous and reflexive. When an organization covers compliance and clarification well in onboarding practices, high potential onboarding has been reached. Each of the examples provided in this section included passive onboarding experiences, where newcomers sought to learn basic legal and policy-related rules

and regulations through the compliance stage.

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Parking. The theme of parking emerged in discussion of newcomers' experience. As part of the compliance stage of onboarding, the newcomers were seeking information—one aspect of socialization—about parking. Three newcomers mentioned their experience with parking, due to the negative tone it left with them during the first few days at their institutions.

Brenda shared her information seeking strategy. The institution was not providing her the information:

Because some of the lots here, the different lots they have for staff parking, there are waiting lists and it takes forever. I actually had asked. I had emailed, before I even started. I asked, "what should I do for parking?" and she gave me some suggestions for what other people do. Then she told me about the city parking, and I said, "well I think it would be a good fit for me coming in, because I lived like 25 miles away, so I didn't want to chance it with the parking on the streets. I just want to have a place where I know I can park."

Unfortunately, Brenda had to request parking information and weigh out the options. Her commute was long enough that she wanted formal information regarding parking options so once she arrived on campus, she could get parked and get to her workspace. Brenda sought information regarding parking options in order to learn the written and unwritten rules (Massaro, 2014).

Karen's experience was even more frustrating. She had not asked and was not given any instruction on parking: "I went and got a parking permit because I got a ticket on my first day because no one told me where to park or what I should do. We didn't do any of that work ahead of time." Karen's experience was frustrating for her due to a lack of communication regarding

parking rules during the clarification process. Eric shared the same recollection. He knew the 92
parking policy but did not like that nobody told him how to get a parking permit. The newcomer
should be provided basic information in the onboarding process as an effort by the institution to
facilitate socialization (Klein & Heuser, 2008, p. 2), and create a sense of belonging (Van
Maanen & Shein, 1979).

Summary of Parking. Parking is an issue on most campuses. The compliance stage of
onboarding is where newcomers are informed about important policies, rules and regulations.
Brenda, Karen and Eric got little or no information on parking. Brenda asked for information,
Karen was issued a ticket on day one due to her lack of information, and Eric was frustrated by
the lack of information regarding available parking. The newcomers were not provided a smooth
transition to campus. If newcomers did not know the parking rules, or how to get a permit, they
began the first day out of compliance. A basic newcomer experience, such as parking, typically
would not even be included in onboarding strategy level one, passive onboarding. The examples
point to a lack of newcomer support during the compliance stage. Unfortunately, the manager
behavior is not part of the experience in the following examples and there is no guidance on
parking (or compliance in general) for newcomers.

Summary of Compliance. Compliance is the first stage of the onboarding process. It is
the Four C's building block that is an expected part of starting a new job. Passive onboarding,
the first level of onboarding, is the "checklist of unrelated tasks to be completed" (Bauer, 2010,
p. 3). One third of organizations are operational, rather than strategic, and engage in passive
onboarding (Aberdeen Group, 2008). This passive onboarding was exemplified in the
recollections of participants in this study. The compliance stage was frustrating for newcomers.
The emerging themes of paperwork, timing, policy, and parking represented experiences of

having inadequate information and guidance. The lack of the compliance stage information about policies left the newcomers unsure about their role in the institution and uncomfortable in their entry into the institution. The institutions involved did not consistently cover these specific aspects of the compliance building block. The gap affected the newcomers' first impressions of the institutions, making them feel less welcome and comfortable.

Clarification

In this section, I discuss findings related to the onboarding building block of clarification. Clarification refers to ensuring that employees understand their new jobs and all related expectations. Bauer (2010) defined role clarity as the “what, when, who and how of getting one’s job done” (p. 3). Compliance in this study included learning about policies and procedures and policies newcomers must implement as they do their jobs, completing paperwork, and navigating the timing of newcomer entry. A strong clarification stage relates to the overall job performance, intention to remain, and commitment. These data were reflected in the meta-analysis study which found that newcomer adjustment directly influences important organizational outcomes, such as new employee job performance, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, employee referrals, intentions to remain, and turnover (Bauer et al., 2007). Themes in this study, related to clarification included: supervisors, jargon, workspaces, department reorganization, training, and insight.

Supervisors. The most important instances of clarification in the study came from the interactions between the newcomers and their supervisors. Ally, Brenda and Heather provided three positive examples of supervisors who provided clarification. Their experiences pointed to specific, intentional clarification provided by immediate supervisors or team members. Ally was initially grateful for her administrative assistant’s clarification in how to contact deans, including

who responds to emails and who does not. On a more intentional scale, Ally's supervisor, the 94 vice president, held individual meetings and team huddles. "We have this weekly huddle and part of the reason the VP developed that was so she hears from all of us and so that we can hear what other people are doing." That was where Ally gained the most clarification pertinent to her role. The vice president set values and mission that the entire team agreed upon. The task then was how the team accomplished things together.

Brenda understood customer service was the biggest value within her unit. Her supervisor made that a point of clarification throughout her first days and weeks on the job. Accuracy and stewardship of federal and state financial aid funding were important points of clarification, relative to improvement of student services as a unit. Her unit met on Friday mornings where they were able to discuss scenarios and how best to serve students.

Heather gained important clarification from her supervisor regarding a needs assessment survey she sent out to faculty advisors. Her supervisor provided feedback on how best to approach the survey. Her supervisor also provided clarification early on as she created space for Heather to get to know her and understand her. There was an intentional plan for Heather upon arrival. Her supervisor provided a list of things she needed to know right away. She also set up weekly meetings the first four months. In those meetings, clarification in Heather's role became more and more the focus. Behaviors and attitudes impacted the clarification stage, more than anything written on paper. In a conversation regarding Heather's role and the budget, Heather noticed at that point that her supervisor was offering clarification but was also open to input.

In contrast, Megan, Mary, Krista and Karen were not provided clarification from supervisors as part of their onboarding experience. In Megan's experience, the supervisor did not lead by example, but rather sought to provide clarification through death-by-meetings. Megan

and her supervisor met twice a day for one-on-ones. She shared:

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It doesn't work for me honestly. I feel like most of my days lately have been preparing for the next meeting instead of being able to have anything to show what I've done from the last one, which is really anxiety inducing. I appreciate a one-on-one if it's productive. It kind of gets stuff moving forward. It wasn't working for her so we're still doing the weekly hour one-on-one and now we meet every morning for ten minutes.

While a brief, regular check-in seemed like a solid approach toward clarification, the twice daily meetings lacked intention, both in agenda and outcomes. The lack of purpose left both the supervisor and newcomer without outcomes.

Similarly, Mary also hoped for fewer meetings and more time to get work done in her current role:

It's interesting, because I had been an associate director at my previous position, so I was comfortable with a level of independence. I was told "You have a good head on your shoulders. You know how to do this. Do your own territory."

In her current role, she asked permission, in order to get more clarification regarding her new institution's procedures and gained her supervisor's approval regularly. Throughout the clarification stage, she wrestled with a loss of independence in comparison to her experience at her previous institution. This may have been her supervisor's way of providing clarification. A proactive onboarding strategy would have included clarification and in turn equipped her with more independence in her role.

Krista believed her supervisor made assumptions of Krista as a newcomer, in terms of where Krista would be provided training and how information would become available. Krista worked closely with a student resource coordinator, a main advisor for the whole college. She,

too, believed Krista was getting training from the department, “First of all, she was only on the 96 job six months. And I think she assumed that the department was giving me a lot of training that I wasn’t getting.” To add to the equation, the department chair was also brand new to the position and to the university. As Krista navigated her new role, there was a lack of clarification. This had a significant impact on her as a newcomer. Because her role was not clear from the start, she lacked self-confidence in her job performance. Self-confidence is one of the short-term outcomes of onboarding during newcomer adjustment. Krista was provided rationale why she was not provided clarification, “When I got hired, my supervisor said, ‘Here’s the job description. This is what we’re anticipating. But we’re going to have to mold this a little bit as it goes.’”

Although her job description was not concrete, Krista was proactive and sought clarification in her role, beyond her immediate department. She shared an experience she had at an orientation session her first summer at the institution. She was working alongside a student helper and two faculty members. It was her second or third orientation. A new student approached her and asked about a transfer class or AP credit. Krista thought it would be a standard question and asked the faculty members:

What’s the process on this? They replied, ‘Well, I don’t know.’ And I thought, ‘well, okay, maybe they don’t.’ So, I went and asked the Student Relations Coordinator (SRC), and she replied, ‘Well, I think it’s this, but I’m not sure.’ Remember, she was pretty new too. And I asked the orientation assistant, and she’d been doing it for three summers. She knew the answer. And so, she called, and we got it. And then we all learned it. It wasn’t like it was that hard, but the students knew the process better than we did.

The lack of clarification continued to impact Krista’s experience in learning her role. In addition

to her job description, Krista, as a newcomer, also worked with the department chair in

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formalizing processes within the department, “I think there would be some kind of manual, or something to move forward...because a lot of it was just figuring it out”.

Krista’s experience points to a lack of processes as part of the clarification stage of onboarding. While this could have held Krista back from engaging in her role, she took it upon herself to gain clarification and at the same time, make connections out of necessity, in that quest for clarification. She understood she would need to work with others in navigating her newcomer experience.

Karen lacked clarification in one of the earliest days on the job. She did not follow a purchasing process she had not been informed of:

I think that’s something we’re really trying to acknowledge too is that we don’t all react the same way.... we submitted our expense reports...and it turns out this was not the way we were supposed to do this. Like we shouldn’t have been able to buy these things. We should have submitted requests; we should have been logging... and we’re just frustrated. And here I am thinking like I don’t want to get punished. I shouldn’t have, I didn’t even know this was a thing.

A lack of communication from a supervisor, as part of the clarification stage of the 4 C’s of onboarding, impacted Karen’s experience as a newcomer. She was not shown the correct process to submit expense reports and was reprimanded for the mistake. In this case, some clarification may have been provided for Karen, but not around expense reports. This would be an example of a Level 1, passive onboarding strategy.

Supervisor Summary. The supervisor has a significant role in the newcomer experience, but the supervisors for the newcomers in this study had inconsistent approaches to aiding their

new employee. With clarification, supervisors made intentional efforts through regular individual⁹⁸ and team meetings early on, and led by example through their behavior and communication. Without clarification, meetings for the sake of meeting seemed pointless. A lack of independence was a barrier for another newcomer. A gap in communication impacted a newcomer negatively in one specific example, which resulted in an error that could have been prevented. And finally, the idea of a newcomer manager training a newcomer direct report was not effective. The department chair and student resource coordinator were both new to their positions, which resulted in less clarification in the newcomer role, specific to the job description.

Jargon. The clarification stage of onboarding is meant to expand the newcomer's understanding of the job. Newcomers need to find shared meaning and learn jargon that will clarify their performance expectations and responsibilities. Ally, Eric and Shani shared examples of the difficulty in matching up jargon and terms. Ally reflects:

Other times, I have the relationships with the people that I'll say, "Look, I don't have the student access, but can you check this out and tell me what you know?" Depending on the situation. There's a lot of learning that goes into the terminology with the access. All that data, you know, what's our retention rate, what's a success rate, what's a...we might think we know that. But the system has one definition, our campus has a different definition that's even a different definition from my background. I'm still in the churn. I have learned a lot in the six months but the best part of what I learned early on is that I might not know. So, I don't take for granted when I say X, Y, Z might not mean the same thing. Things, that in my mind, from past experience should 'withdraw.' Withdraw is the word. But withdraw means 10 different things to 10 different people.

Finding shared meaning in the institutional vocabulary is one of the steps of clarification a

newcomer takes. In this example, Ally had a difficult time getting to the basic jargon, so that she⁹⁹ could be on the same page as others in her institution.

Megan found certain wording to be confusing at times. “So, in terms of the university, we’re not student life and development or student support, we’re not academic support, we’re this thing in the middle of two administrative units.” While she does not have the title of academic advisor, she works in that office and does advising. She shared, “That was not communicated to me.” Defining the newcomer role and providing clarification is essential in the onboarding experience. A lack of clarification negatively affected Megan’s understanding of her position and role at the university. Without a clear understanding of what her role entailed, it was difficult for Megan to fulfill her job and feel good about her performance. Again, a short-term outcome of onboarding is self-confidence. The newcomer should feel confident in doing the job well.

Brenda shared a positive clarification experience within her role, “But sometimes students will come and ask for special circumstance because they saw it somewhere, either on the federal website or some or another school calls it special circumstance. So, when somebody says special circumstance or special condition, they’re talking about the same thing for financial aid.” Brenda’s institution provided her with clarification in her role regarding the definitions she would experience within her unit, such as ‘special circumstance’ and ‘special condition.’ Brenda experienced clarification in her role early on, specific to jargon within her unit. This was a positive aspect of her onboarding experience within the clarification stage that helped her perform her job as expected within the institution.

Jargon Summary. Finding shared meaning and defining jargon consistently is an important step for newcomers in understanding their roles. The institution may or may not share

important terminology with the newcomer, so figuring out what certain terms actually mean can be as important as understanding the newcomer role, working with others most effectively across campus, or serving the student to newcomers' highest ability. The words used are an important piece of the clarification process. If the institution does not share the meaning behind the jargon, it is up to the newcomer to decipher it. An intentional onboarding process would include explaining jargon during the clarification stage.

Workspaces. Two newcomers described the impact newcomer workspaces had within the clarification stage of onboarding. Clarification of workspace helps in expanding the newcomers' understanding of the job. Matt reflected on his workspace:

That's the one space that every team uses. It's also a shared facility. Most places would have an athletics facility and then a general student facility. I still think that's the best way to do it, to be honest, because you are kind of compromising both populations when you do both. It's like there are scheduled open times, but when you mix them together, that's where it can be really hard.

As he spoke, he gained clarification of his role and shared the downside of being a shared facility as his workspace, "And then they just see me as, instead of a coach that's there to help them, they see me as an enforcer or something." Matt's role was to train athletes, not send non-student athletes away because the space was scheduled for only athletes. In this case, a lack of clarification impacted Matt's job since he was not hired to be the gatekeeper for the space, but rather to be a coach for student athletes.

Ally started in a position that was brand new to the institution:

Initially it was a question of 'would I be willing to work off campus and do it' and I said I'd be willing to do that. I thought that given the nature of my kind of position, it would be

a good idea to be on campus. Fortunately, a space opened up that worked out. So, got into¹⁰¹ my space. My first couple of days were mostly picking out the computer that I wanted, doing the normal onboarding kind of things that have to do with human resources, that kind of stuff.

Ally explained that they were creating the position as they went along. Onboarding was not extensive because the position and workspace had not been set up before. Ally was grateful for the administrative assistant who invited Ally along on errands across campus, “here’s how you get from this building to that building.” She showed Ally where to eat, where the restrooms were and where to find office supplies. This clarification stage of onboarding had a positive impact on Ally’s job as she began to settle into her workspace.

Workspace Summary. Participants reflected on their workspace as part of the clarification process in understanding the impact of their workspace in carrying out their work within their new institution. Clarification occurs as the newcomer begins to understand the role within the institution and how the workspace is part of that role clarification. For some, it is as simple as a desk and a computer, but for others, it is a broader understanding of the role within the institution and how the role intersects with others at the institution.

Department Reorganization. Another emerging theme within clarification and the understanding of the newcomers’ role was department reorganization. Krista shared the positive and negative of the uniqueness of her position,

There is only one other position like mine in the university. We’ve run into each other, but our jobs are so different that we don’t really have a lot, other than the fact that we’ll be in meetings, and they’ll say, “...this might not apply to you,” or “...we probably need to make a special adaptation so you can do this too.

Krista's role was like a student resource coordinator, however, early on, Krista was told her job 102 description was not final and would ultimately mold into something different. The lack of communication and clarity created a gap in understanding of her role and how her role situated more broadly within the department.

Ally came into a new position, which was recently created. Ally's position was not even posted when she interviewed, "So the position that I took here is a new position. It was recently created in student success and when I interviewed for the position, it wasn't exactly even posted."

So, because the student success position is brand new, there was nothing like, "Here's what you'll be doing, here's what the thing is," because we were creating it as we went... but the actual onboarding that you're more interested in wasn't very extensive because it hadn't been set up before.

Megan also spoke about her position as a newer version of a previous position:

A version of it existed in the past, but they haven't had one for, I'm honestly not sure how long. A couple years before I started. Some of what I did was...my supervisor, my director handled it, some of it was grad students, some of it was other staff. It was kind of divided...between a bunch of people. My position, the idea behind it, that we have two orientation programs. They're the people who are ultimately responsible for them, so my supervisor's ultimately responsible for our welcome week. Our director is ultimately responsible for advising and registration. In the past, I think it's been two different people, who work really closely together, but who kind of have their own pieces. We haven't always been as intentional about those programs building off of each other. They've been very separate. So, my position, the idea, is to build some bridges between

them and really think about how Advising and Registration leads into our welcome week¹⁰³ and how students are kind of getting information that makes sense at different times.

Department Reorganization Summary. Participants shared their reactions as newcomers who experienced department reorganization. This clarification stage was an important part of their experience. Organizational changes made it more difficult to have a full sense of what the newcomer needed to know to fulfill their responsibilities. It was an informal clarification process, rather than an intentional clarification process, as part of onboarding. As they understood their own role and the roles of others, they also tried to understand what the structure was previously and how it had changed. It felt like it was the first time each of them had considered this as an important part of understanding their role within the institution.

Training. Clarification in how one gets the job done often occurs through training. The clarification stage is aimed at helping the newcomer to be more effective in the specific role. The greater the role clarity, the more well-adjusted the new employee. A lack of clarity could lead to poor performance and attitude (Bauer, 2010). Training is essential for the newcomer in terms of onboarding and adjustment. It is the step that follows newcomer hire, entry and compliance. Seven participants' training experiences stood out.

Brenda had a positive training experience. She was told that the assistant directors in her area each specialized in something specific. She was provided a manual and trained on who handled each area. With that starting point, Brenda was able to make her own notes to add to the manual that stated the different sections. She felt confident in her reference tool, "If somebody has a question about a special condition, go to this person."

Heather's training was more organic. The introductions to those in other areas she would work with eventually, continued the organic process of asking questions as she went along,

which provided a much looser, casual type of training experience, “going to all of the staff meeting, going to financial aid staff meeting and then admission staff meeting and then putting a face to a name.” Her supervisor walked her through different aspects of her role, but there was nothing formal about what she experienced in her area. 104

Megan’s training experience was less formal and more confusing in the sense she had two supervisors, one main supervisor, and several meetings with her main supervisor which did not point to formal training. While her responsibility was to train faculty advisors, she felt no formal training support underneath her, “Being on day three and having to teach faculty stuff was a learning experience, for sure.”

Krista explained she did not receive specific training of any type, “The department chair was brand new to the position and relatively new to the university, and I did not get a lot of training.” She described her role as focused on student services and non-faculty academic services. Her peer on campus, with a main advisor role for the whole college, most likely assumed Krista was provided training. Upon hire, Krista was told by the Dean that Krista’s job description was going to be molded “a little bit as it goes.”

Ally’s role was new to the institution. She had little training beyond the human resources modules, “That was really how the university did their onboarding list, through that set of videos. There must’ve been four or five of them.” Since there was little information provided specific to her role, she found her own path to training, and chose to attend as many committee meetings as possible to learn from the roundtable discussions which were already occurring. She saw this as an opportunity to hone her role and build connections as she learned.

Shani described her training experience as aimed at diversity training through human resources, “There was only one diversity training that I signed up for in the beginning, but it

really wasn't about bringing new people together. It was more of a training for everyone." 105

Considering training more specific to her role, Shani thought it would be helpful to learn beyond her own role and mentioned cross-training, since no one else did what she did at the institution. "Like taking a vacation, anything is extra punishment, because there's nobody that can help my students."

Eric expressed concern that training was insufficient in his experience:

I think the piece is, it's not HR. It kind of is because the training falls on them. The system wide database, any of these kinds of systems take a lot of training and there is no training. We were laughing about that one - kind of laughing and crying - because even since being back here, I said, "I wouldn't look for a report out of ISRS, there is no documentation on it. There's no training online, there's nothing." One colleague shook her head, "Yes. Sadly yes, there is no training and there never was." I likened it to a ski instructor. Amateurs teaching amateurs to be amateurs. It's the same kind of thing. It really isn't anybody's, necessarily. It's not a fault; it's just everybody since about the last 10 years has been cut so thin, nobody's got time to stop and do that stuff.

In his reflection regarding training Eric concluded, "Unfortunately, with those data systems, there's no training. There just isn't. But there's good enough people around who you can walk by and say, "Walk me through that."

Training Summary. Training is an important aspect of the clarification stage of onboarding. Understanding one's role and how to do it is essential in contributing toward the work of the institution. When training is lacking, there is a gap in the clarification stage of onboarding. An intentional training approach included a resource manual provided to a few of the newcomers. However, an organic training approach was more common, where informal

introductions were made for the newcomer to do the work and learn by doing the job. Other 106

newcomers made their own training path by attending meetings or recommending cross training in their area. At the very least the newcomer needed to know who to ask if there were questions. Most newcomers in this study felt that they were on their own to figure out how to do their jobs.

Insight. Clarification provides newcomers with insight into their job or performance. Significant moments are an important part of the newcomer experience. Newcomers were deeply reflective in sharing what insight they experienced in their new role, or what stood out as a significant moment to them. Much of what they shared was related to how they were to engage with their unit or with students. These insights became points of clarification in the newcomers' roles. The sensemaking process was continuous.

Matt reflected on his role beyond his job description. In the clarification stage, he began to understand he was there to support students beyond strength training:

I've dealt with things that are maybe a little outside of just the training and daily operations of the gym. As far as interactions with a certain player who might have some personal issues or things like that. But I can't say that's a surprise. You know, that's something that, as a coach... I'm not saying that everybody likes to come see me or anything, but you're going to have different athletes gravitate or connect with different coaches. For whatever reason, there's a personality thing or whatever. If anyone does reach out to me, that isn't really in the job description. I can't say that's really a surprise.

That's just part of coaching this organization.

Relationships were at the forefront of Matt's description of his newcomer experiences. As he clarified his role in operating a weight room, he made early connections with students, the janitorial staff, and a graduate assistant. Matt was intentional about this, since he knew he would

not have a staff to support him. He was relieved to know he was not required to teach on top of 107 his main role.

I have a strength and conditioning graduate assistant on the football staff to help me with all things football, which is good because that's the biggest roster. I don't have a dedicated strength and conditioning assistant. They told me that I wasn't going to have anything. I don't see how I could put a teaching assignment on top of this. I know my priority is to train teams.

In her first days as a newcomer, Mary experienced the clarification stage vividly as she learned how communication would be handled within her unit. When seeking clarification, she was met with a barrier. At her previous institution if she was not getting the response she was looking for, she would request a conversation to work through it.

Megan learned she would need to approach leadership within her unit in different manners:

I think it was not directly said to me. After we got through summer, I remember saying to our director. She said, "Yes that is exactly what you need to be doing." But they hadn't explicitly said it in that way. But anyway, so I think coming from that perspective, the way I engage with students...I wouldn't say that I'd had to change it a lot, but it looks different from how everyone else in my office does because I think supervising students and advising students are really different things. One is a lot more relationship than the other. Boundaries are different, the way you talk is different, and access is different. And so, for me, doing both kind of have to flip between those mindsets a lot all day.

Once clarification begins for the newcomer, there is still sensemaking taking place, which is the case for Megan:

My skills are in orientation and the relationship thing and understanding transition and 108 things like that. I'm willing to do advising. I'm not necessarily upset that I'm doing it, but it's never going to be where I operate from comfortably. I don't think that'll ever change. So, do I have more subject matter knowledge at this point? Yes. But is it something I can just do naturally? Not necessarily.

Megan's greatest insight came as she reflected on her journey as a newcomer and her role as an advisor. While she gained clarification in her role, which included advising, she also reflected on her comfort level in that area of her position.

Insight Summary. Newcomers' insights regarding the onboarding experience were a robust portion of the interview. Experiences in working with colleagues, students and supervisors were easily referenced when asked to share an insight or significant moment as a newcomer. Again, it seemed as if this may have been the first time anyone had asked them to reflect on such a topic as their onboarding experience. Intentional onboarding would include an opportunity for a check-in with newcomers on some level, to discern what the newcomers' insight might reveal to the institution, department, supervisor or colleagues.

Summary of Clarification. Several themes emerged from participant responses related to the clarification building block of onboarding. This is where sensemaking takes deep roots in the newcomer experience as the definition of the newcomer's role and the understanding of that role within the institution begins to develop. The supervisor played a major role in the clarification process. Supervisors provided meetings to clarify performance expectations. Without intentional clarification from supervisors, newcomers struggled to understand the expectations and responsibilities in their role. Workspace and department organization were examples of structural newcomer adjustment experiences. Support occurred through training.

The pause for reflection by the participants increased greatly when referencing an early significant moment or insight, definitions and assumptions. Throughout the interviews, it was clear that in the clarification process, there was very little follow up or check in with most of the newcomers, specifically during clarification stage, to answer questions or offer support. Most of the newcomers held the responsibility for obtaining role clarification from the beginning of their employment.

Question 2: How are Connections Made through the Onboarding Process?

In this section, I discuss findings related to my second research question, “How do student support professionals make connections through the onboarding process?” This question is most concerned with the connections that bond newcomers with other members of the institution. When done well, newcomers are given a head start and begin to feel like they belong. Connection refers to the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks that new employees must establish (Bauer, 2010). This onboarding step is dedicated to helping new hires feel like they are part of the institution. In this step, employees integrate into their new team and begin contributing to the institution’s mission. Emerging themes included within this building block: introductions, challenges, building relationships and trust, connections outside the work area and in the community, informal mentors, frontline employees, and support.

Introductions

Participants were asked to share how they were introduced to the key offices with which they have interacted. Eric believed his unit was very good at connections and working together. He was introduced around campus early on:

I think the offices are so dependent on each other, all the staff within the offices. It’s, “Can you help me cover? Do this? Do that? Can you travel for me?” Those things. My boss

pretty much walked me around campus, walked me here and there and said, “Hey, this is¹⁰ our new person.” You’d never remember everybody’s names, but you slowly started.

While he was introduced to others around campus, he was also limited to those introductions and needed to meet people on his own while performing his job:

The flip side of it is, is that I’m interacting with people that I don’t know, for instance, with data. Well, I was fortunate to be in a data team at my previous institution and so I started talking about some of that and this individual has cows. So, I started talking about, “Well, we still have a farm where I grew up and the guy who leases the property has his cows.” I felt like those are the little things that you can do to get away from the work and still break the ice with somebody that you’re showing them you know what you’re doing.

Eric believed there was strategy in the introductions he personally initiated as part of the connection building block, “I’m building relationship with this person. Will it get me where I want to be? Yes. Will it create a better work environment? Yeah.”

Krista was introduced to her unit through the work itself:

Just through having to work together, I think, was how I got most connected.

Working through problems and processes, and just doing the work of the work.

There’s a lot of levels in almost everything we do, so you can’t really do a lot on your own, which is good.

Krista made connections as she engaged in the work. This organic process was important for Krista as she joined the institution in the summer. Krista also met others through her interview process and tour of the campus and community. This created a feeling of belonging as newcomer as those insiders circled back to welcome her through their work together.

Shani was not offered introductions and compared that to her onboarding experience at her previous institution:

I wasn't introduced to people in other departments or really shown around campus. I didn't get any opportunity to connect with financial aid or another office. In my previous position, I was in constant contact with those offices on behalf of students.

Shani was able to think of one informal introduction that took place outside of her work area:

A co-worker of mine – his wife was in admissions, and he was the only person to come to me and say that he knew we were new to the town and asked if my husband and I wanted to go out and get a drink. We kind of became friends with them and through her is how I was introduced to the university. So, an informal setting I would say.

Shani experienced an organic process in connecting with others from campus, through introductions outside of her work area. A casual invitation from a campus insider made an impact on Shani's experience as a newcomer.

Heather believes her boss paved the way by first introducing Heather within her own established network across campus:

Everybody here knows everybody else. And, of course, my boss who's a gem, she's an amazing person. She knows everyone and she'd say, "Oh, her grandmother went to school with my blah, blah, blah." And I'd say, "Is there any human you don't know on this planet?"

Heather was part of a much larger unit at her previous institution. At her current institution, she instigated some of the introductions: "There's not 40, like a rotating door like it was at my previous institution. There's only eight or nine of us. So, in my space for there to be three

people. Okay. “Let’s all go to lunch.” Heather felt an early sense of belonging due her boss’ intentional introductions across campus and to a smaller staff size with opportunities to get to know one another outside of the department workspace.

Mary initially felt like the introductions happened organically:

Well, I think when I came in, the folks that were in the office at the time were pretty good about like getting together and doing things and going out for happy hour or getting a meal or coffee or whatever.

Mary experienced an organic connection process with introductions shared during a meal or happy hour. These experiences helped Mary feel a sense of belonging as a newcomer during the connection stage of onboarding. She went on to compare her unit with another unit of the University:

And I would say that the other staff is almost maybe worse at connecting people, because everybody runs their own ship. Everybody on the one staff is very close. Everyone on the other staff is very close. But coaches, sport to sport, they’re not particularly close.

As a newcomer, Mary observed how she connected at the institution and how employees in other units made connections. As she recalled her experience and what she saw others’ experiences she was pleased with how quickly she felt a sense of belonging.

Introductions Summary

Introductions were an important part of the newcomers’ experiences in making connections. The way newcomers became connected through their job performance and began to feel a sense of belonging was an important takeaway in this section. Connections were mainly created through an organic process of invitations by existing employees to newcomers,

either out for coffee or for a happy hour or meeting in work groups and cross-functional meetings and committees. Another organic example of connection was the newcomer whose colleague attended meetings with her in the first few days. Face-to-face and email introductions were common. Introductions were made by a supervisor around campus. One newcomer was fortunate to have a department retiree introduce her to key insiders. Conversely, it was the responsibility of the newcomer in some instances, to make the connections through introductions. In one case, making connections as an onboarding building block was a newcomer strategy, rather than an institutional strategy. So, connections happened, but not always with intentionality and often while doing the work or outside socializing. Due to a lack of institutional onboarding strategy, this is an example of passive onboarding.

Challenges

In the study, a few newcomers made connections due to challenges or opportunities that arose. Matt was proud to say he has met challenges head-on as a newcomer. He believed you must work with what you have and with who you have. He's had to get creative with resources and acknowledges he does not have assistance in his role:

I've gotten lucky with some of it, to be honest. When I came in, there was already a volunteer coach working with two of our sport programs. I'm not in any position to turn down any help, plus, one is with one of our most successful programs. If anything, I can learn something from him. Setting egos aside ... maybe 10 years ago, I might've thought, I'm going to be gung-ho and do this all by myself. But now, even though right now I'm doing a lot of it by myself, I still know that it could be better. They're going to be limited by just what I know. I want to surround myself with people that might know

Matt recalled the challenges he faced early on and acknowledged that building connections with those who could enhance his work unit would be most beneficial. He was realistic in his description of the newcomer experience and the fact that it is not always easy and you must work with limited resources.

Like Matt, Ally saw the potential in creating further connections through the established relationships she had on campus. She planned to find answers to her questions during the newcomer adjustment by asking those with whom she already had connections on campus. Ally's approach was, "I've got access to the very best of our institutional data and I can ask the questions in the ways that maybe we haven't asked them before and that's really an advantage of not being in a traditional student support office." Ally was able to create connections through her role on campus. Her position and office location on campus helped her to build relationships organically.

Megan acknowledged she had freedom to make some changes, and crafted the idea of being resourceful in her new role:

With advising and registration, that stuff does exist, and I've had a lot of freedom to make some changes. So, we're building in a session where they're still in groups divided the way that we normally would, but the faculty advisor or the professional advisor are out of the room for the first half hour of that so students can do some ice breakers and...

As a newcomer, Megan ultimately needed to sell an idea to her boss' boss:

It was logistically challenging, but it wasn't hard, for me at least, to convince (her), who would ultimately make the decision here, that it mattered. It was just, "Okay, but what is

it going to look like in terms of day-to-day?” So basically, I went through our entire schedule and thought about what each audience is doing at all times and really had to piece together the puzzle so if faculty advisors aren’t in the room for a while, where are they and how are we not wasting their time and what are they doing and how can we maximize that time. How does that affect parents, how does that affect...?

Megan did not have an earlier connection with her boss’ boss. In fact, she was new to her institution and to her area and reported to two different supervisors. Krista took a challenge and built a connection as a newcomer. She wanted to make a good first impression but also find some common ground in dealing with a challenge as a team.

Krista made connections as she staffed a new student orientation and did not have answers for the specific questions she was asked. These challenges allowed her to connect with the student orientation leader working alongside her. The student was able to answer the question and Krista was able to make a meaningful connection on campus, with a student, organically.

Heather’s greatest challenges were with the close-knit approach of the team she joined. She believed everyone was almost too familiar with personal connections and stories. The narratives she experienced were not what she expected. The challenges of storytelling in her unit disconnected her. She did not want to participate in the unproductive small talk. Heather framed the situation as a positive outcome, due to the conversation she was able to have with her supervisor. She made a deeper connection as a newcomer by speaking out regarding office professionalism. The risk was worth it. An organic process of working through a challenge led to a stronger working relationship and connection with her supervisor from the start.

Challenges Summary. Newcomers faced challenges, alongside the responsibility to make their own connections. While challenges are not unique to newcomers or insiders of the organization, a proactive onboarding strategy would provide connections to assist newcomers in navigating challenges. While some supervisors worked through challenges with their new employees, the limited resources in most of the newcomers' areas meant the newcomer had to be proactive in making connections. Creating connections was not an intentional onboarding strategy of the institutions involved. Ironically, limited access to information and resources created a reason for newcomers to find connections intentionally. One newcomer's challenge within her role forced her to work more directly with her supervisor in developing a new twist to the way students connect with one another. An intentional onboarding strategy would include connections, in order to reduce the challenges newcomers face early on at the institution. Making connections early on would allow newcomers and insiders to solve challenges together.

Building Relationships

A robust response regarding how connections are made, came through the emergent theme of building relationships. Most of the responsibility in building connections as part of the onboarding process was on the newcomers. Heather, Eric and Ally took strategic approaches to build relationships on their own, since the opportunity was not intentionally offered by the institution. Connections made by newcomers through building relationships led to more impactful experiences and greater levels of trust. Heather reflected:

I think what I've always learned is that building relationships outside is about doing the best job you can, being true to your word. If you say you're going to have something done by 2:00 on Friday, you have it done by noon on Thursday. You know,

it's about being the best at your job that you can be, about being reliable. And then being, making their job easier 100% of the time, doing the best job you can do and being a genuine person that they want to spend time with. And you know what? Relationships take care of themselves.

A newcomer can build relationships and make connections early on by meeting and exceeding expectations with the newcomer role.

Eric reiterated the strategy lies in building relationships and furthering connections on your own:

You never treat people like crap because they all have their own story. They're all doing their work. There are times where you get frustrated with people, but for the most part, that's what I've always loved about this campus. You learned by going to meetings, meeting people and talking.

Eric's experience pointed to an organic process of connecting with others in a natural, unplanned way without a formal onboarding process to expedite the connections.

Within the relationship building aspects of the connection onboarding stage, the newcomer seeks to establish a level of trust with others. Megan shared her experience:

Asking for help is really hard for me. So, just in terms of getting to a point where I trusted people, even if I wasn't getting into the details of this tricky supervision stuff, just being able to say I'm struggling, I don't know a lot of people here. I worry about my job all day, every day. I think I would reiterate relationships being super key, especially early on. Had my supervisor's boss not been in the position she was, I would not have made it. I care a lot about orientation and supporting students through transition and helping them find community. It's been interesting to do that, but not

quite have figured out everything for myself.

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Karen understood trust in building relationships as a part of the connection experience:

I think one thing that we all really value is being able to trust and rely on each other as a team. If my coworker's out but a student comes in from his territory, I'm willing to cover and meet with that student. We're not going to tell the student, sorry, your counselors aren't here, come a different day. Being able to cover for each other, relay information, pick up slack.

Building trust and helping others, across the department, was part of making connections as a newcomer for Karen.

Ally also found building relationships to be essential in gaining trust and momentum with those she works with:

For me, it's important because in my role, I know why I'm going to tread on some people's space and on their methods and the way they're used to doing things. I find it's really important to develop some personal relationships so that when I get into those spaces, my intent is not being questioned. It's like, "You know, I'm a good person. This is who I am, and this is the deal and what we are moving forward. I would like you to go and be a part of that," kind of mentality. For me, developing those relationships but knowing who it was that would have the authority, would have the influence, would have the ability. Additionally, who are the frontline people. It's okay for me to talk to the vice president about what students think and say, but it's really different to talk to the people at the campus union about what students are telling them.

Ally was strategic in her relationship building as the connections she made assisted her in her work across campus.

Connections were difficult if the newcomer was isolated or felt isolated. Matt had a very isolating experience to share as he worked mainly with different sports and coaches but is in a different building than all of them. He saw himself as separated from the group he works with most closely. He continued to share it is not a unique situation, but one that he reflected on a bit more:

Maybe I'm not getting as much contact as I should. I don't think that's unique to this institution. I mean it was like that where I was at before. It just makes sense for the strength coach to have an office in the weight room.

His greatest interactions early on were with faculty from the academic programs within his same building. He was able to make connections with others on campus due to his workspace location.

In some cases, workspace was not determined before the newcomer arrived. This was the case for Ally:

I do like the space that we're in because I've got access to the very best of our institutional data and I can ask the questions in the ways that maybe we haven't asked them before, comparing that way, and that's really the advantage of being not in a traditional student support space.

Ally appreciated her location and unique situation in building connections while doing her assigned work. This is an example of information socialization.

As a newcomer, Megan had the opportunity to choose her own workspace. She was strategic in doing so:

I picked it because I have an extra route, so everyone has to walk by me. I'm a real relationship-oriented person and I didn't know anyone in this community when I

moved. I moved here for the job. So, I think something that's been for better or worse, 120 something that I think about all day, every day is just relationships and who are kind of my people in the institution that I've connected with or that kind of took me under their wing or have checked in with me and things like that.

Megan had a plan to meet people and have access to others through her workspace location. Workspace location was not enough for Megan to be successful in making connections. The reality of putting all of her effort into her work and not having any connections to show for it was an eye opener for Megan:

It was a strange thing where I was like, "Okay, I feel like because we had done so much in the three months, I feel like I've been there for a while now, but I don't know anyone around me." I really haven't met people outside of work. There's a person in another department that grew up with my former supervisor, so we got connected right away and she was a student at a private institution where I worked. We're around the same age, so she really helped me do the translating thing of very different places - 'here's this institution's version of what you've experienced.'

As Megan recalled her experience, it occurred to her that even her best efforts could not create the connection and relationship building she was hoping for. Her expectations were different than her experiences as a newcomer. Without a formal onboarding strategy, it was up to her to make connections and build relationships.

Building Relationships Summary

The largest take-away from this section, in response to how connections were made, is that newcomers were responsible to build connections on their own. This is largely due to the

lack of proactive onboarding strategies provided by the institution. Relationships were developed both organically and strategically. Newcomers asked for help and developed trust, similar to college students. They make their assessments of those around them, regardless of narratives existing employees may share. Newcomers connected wherever possible, even outside their specific units. Newcomers asked strategic questions and found strategic office spaces which allowed organic introductions and connections to occur. The work at hand was the focus, which offered opportunities to build trust and connections.

Relationship building related to other elements of connection like introductions, challenges, connections outside the work area and in the community, frontline employees, informal mentors, and support. Building relationships with those in authority as well as with frontline workers was an important aspect of making connections as a newcomer. It was essential newcomers kept an open mind to potential connections outside of the newcomers' unit as opportunities presented themselves. Challenges such as office locations created opportunities for introductions and connections to occur naturally. When newcomers asked for help and sought informal mentors, connections were made.

Relationship building was not an institutional strategy in any of the newcomers' experiences. While an institution cannot force employees to be friendly and work well together, the institution can promote an expectation of professionalism, respectful interactions and on-going professional development that includes newcomers. A standardized onboarding process that includes a checklist of introductions (within and outside of the newcomers' units) would be a step in the direction of expecting introductory connections to be made. This would move the onboarding strategy toward a high potential or proactive strategy.

The other participants either did not talk about relationship building or more likely, they

had a negative experience. Some were not welcomed at all. Shani's first experiences were extremely negative. Matt had no one around him due to his office space being separate from his department. Conversely, Brenda dove into the work and had already met some of her co-workers. She developed relationships strategically and felt more connected early on. Heather was the only participant who had an amazing introductory experience, created by her supervisor, inside and outside of her unit. This allowed her to build and further connections on her own.

When proactive onboarding processes were lacking or absent within the institution, there was greater responsibility on the newcomer to show up with integrity and reliability. Newcomers seized opportunities for connections as they presented themselves. Newcomers took time during the interviews to reflect on their experiences and connections. This was very important. Things had improved for some. Opportunities to connect appeared as time went on. Relationships were developed either organically or strategically. No matter what, connections made through relationship building was critical.

Connections Outside Area

Newcomers found making connections at their institution, outside of their work area, to be more challenging. Shani took the initiative to invite others to lunch to begin to make connections organically, "I've set up like five different lunch dates with people in the next upcoming weeks and that actually feels great." Shani went on to explain some of her connections are made outside of work:

Some of the people that work at this institution in different departments I've met outside of work. It just happened to be that we had to communicate about something, and she's nice and helpful and so I was like, "Do you want to go to lunch sometime?"

And so, I have done that. Every person that works here that I've connected with, I met at an event outside. 123

Ally continued to make connections during meetings:

I connected apart from my office with other spaces probably as a result of being in those specific committee meetings where there are other areas. There's a general advising across campus that we do in several different ways. Being included in those meetings allows me to say, "I'd love to talk with each of you individually and learn what you are doing and how you're doing that. All you need to do is send me a calendar invite and I'm there."

Heather believed in building those outside connections, especially since she lived in another city:

I think that helps build relationships outside as well. I mean, I just, like, the disability office person just emailed me today and was like, "Let's go have coffee." I'm like, "Okay, let's go." So, I think that helps as well. I don't live close so that's tough.

Another common theme mentioned relative to connections made outside of the newcomers' areas was the role of unions. Half of the participants responded with union themes. Shani believed the idea of unwritten rules applied in her area and had hoped union meetings might clarify some of the gray areas she experienced, "Because if you're talking with your colleagues, our boss walks by and it's known that you shouldn't be talking." She wondered how a newcomer can make connections when there are unwritten rules about when and how you communicate.

Brenda attended union meetings if it fit her schedule, "I like to be informed and know

what's happening, especially as they're negotiating contracts and everything right now." Ally 124
opted out of being a dues-paying member and shared, "I knew what it meant. I can't be
appointed to any committees, and I don't have a problem with that because I'm getting
appointed to those committees in different ways, but not as representing the union."

Connections Outside Area Summary. Connections made outside of newcomers' work
areas are even more challenging if the institution does not provide a proactive onboarding
process. The key take-away in this section is that participants who shared successes in meeting
others outside of their unit were proactive and personally responsible for making connections.
Challenges in meeting others outside of the newcomer's area in making connections included:
tours were not automatically offered, the timing of the newcomer's arrival and an immediate
focus on the work. Newcomers either invited other campus employees to lunch or met them
during required meetings. Unions did not play a role in providing connections. Newcomers were
once again responsible to go and meet others on their own.

The lack of connections outside of the newcomer's work area relates to the other
elements of connection, such as introduction challenges, connections in the community, frontline
employees, informal mentors, and support. Without a proactive onboarding strategy from within
the institution, it is possible that a newcomer does not meet others from across campus in a
formal or informal manner without individual effort.

Other participants shared that meeting others outside of their area was tricky, if not
impossible. One challenge was a long commute which prevented meeting others after work.
Another challenge was the inability to meet anyone outside of the unit due to the workload. The
interview in this study was the first point of awareness for one participant. There was emotion
with the realization the connections were not being made.

Within the three stages of the socialization framework, expectation and belonging fit this¹²⁵ newcomer experience of making connections outside of their areas. Because newcomer expectations of the job and organization are formed prior to arrival, they may bring with them deep connections from previous organizations. The feeling of belonging is an important aspect of the onboarding process as newcomers make sense of their experiences related to connections. If connections are not made early on, the newcomer's expectations are not met. The process of newcomers becoming connected with organizational insiders is an organic process, given the experiences represented in this study. The institutions were not responsible for a proactive onboarding process which includes connection as one of the four stages of onboarding. The lack of connections made outside of the newcomers' areas points to a passive institutional onboarding strategy.

Community Connection

The vital interpersonal connections newcomers made within their communities, or hoped to make, was an important emerging theme as well. Those who had positive experiences reflected on opportunities to meet others, such as a great community tour as part of the newcomer experience, returning to a familiar community, a spouse with an established network and a high school age student. There were also barriers to making connections, such as financial tension, a growing family, a long commute, and unique interests.

Krista attributed her community connection to the institution's intentional measures. She was included in community tours and a co-worker went with her to the various sites for their work. Krista reflected, "It might've been different if I were 25. I can figure out some stuff on my own at this point. I've got some experience."

Megan also experienced a relatively positive community connection experience. She

shared an example of a community connection she made through a unique interest, even though 126
it did not result in a broader community connection due to the nature of the experience:

I'm a poet, so there's a poetry open mic once a month that I started going to. The person who coordinates that actually works on campus, so I met him through that. He and his wife are the only ones that I've really chatted with at that because it's kind of like an event that happens and then you leave.

Ally connected within the community through her spouse's role:

My personal support system is in place with family outside of here. The first years were spent getting familiar with the area. We moved here because my husband took a job here. I have been fortunate to have attended events with lots of people and that has been an advantage. I have developed a support system from that. When I came on board it was, "Hey, it's great that you're working for us now." That's an advantage.

In contrast, Mary has not made the type of connections she would like and believed she and her spouse had tried, but maybe not hard enough. Starting a family made for a different dynamic in making connections as well:

I don't know that we did a great job of that to be honest. I still don't really feel like my spouse and I are super grounded here. If we were in a different stage in our life, I think it would have been very likely that we would have joined some kind of club or pool league.

Heather had not yet moved to the community due to a financial barrier:

I think it would be tough moving into the community. It's been really hard. The other thing that's been a real struggle is it's really hard financially to find a way to live in this community. I'm just still struggling with that. It's a real push and pull because working here has made me so much happier. It's like, but how the hell do I live here? I really

would like to have my own place but can't afford it for a while. It's still really tough. 127

Karen had not connected in her institution's community either:

I can talk with a few people in the office about work stuff but also life stuff. To be honest, I haven't really made friends outside of the office here. My husband is from here, so most of my friends are his friends, spouses or significant others. I haven't really found my own people, which is kind of frustrating and a little isolating.

Community Connections Summary. While community connections occurred for some participants, without a formal introduction to the community and examples of ways to connect, making community connections was the responsibility of the newcomers. The larger take-away of this section is that only one institution provided a community tour for the newcomer. Building strong, interpersonal connections in the community was left as a responsibility to the newcomer, unless a spouse or family member had an established network.

The experiences and connections made within the newcomer's community are parallel to the connections made outside the newcomer's area on campus. It is extremely challenging for connections to be made with the responsibility placed entirely on the newcomer. The institution could have been strategic, through intentional community tours and introductions between newcomers and community members. One participant described the challenge of moving without his spouse and dog. That put an automatic hold on community connections as his temporary housing was on campus. The newcomer did not experience the community for several months until his spouse arrived. Another newcomer mentioned financial challenges in finding a home near the campus community. The institution could have provided general housing information for newcomers. Making community connections as newcomers without housing secured was extremely challenging.

This study of connections through onboarding pointed to specific connections made between newcomers and informal mentors. The emergent theme was an organic process of connections through informal mentorship. There were no formal mentors assigned the newcomers. It was rare that a supervisor would also become a mentor. Five newcomers had informal mentors in their newcomer experience. Informal mentoring is defined as “the natural coming together between a mentor and protégé” (Inzer & Crawford, 2005, p. 33)

Krista’s mentor was a recent retiree from her institution:

There was someone who just retired, and he was instrumental. Although he didn’t have a formal role in it, he was instrumental in my training. He gave me what he thought I should do in the first eight weeks. Like, “Week one, you should accomplish this.” He gave me a list of probably 20 people he thought I should meet. He did a few email introductions for me, for ones that might be a little more difficult to contact, so he was fabulous. He introduced me via email to some of those people that he thought would be important in my workings. Then I was able to just email them, “Hey, can we get together and meet for 10, 15 minutes, and just get a sense for how our jobs might interact?” So that was good. And then because he had given me that list of people. Those aren’t people that I necessarily encounter every day, but when I need them, now they’ve been introduced. He had so much foresight.

Shani was fortunate to have a mentor during her first year as a newcomer:

There was a woman who just left who had been there 50 years. She was my person. She and I worked closely together, and she was so kind and sweet and always helped me. And when I made mistakes, if it was somebody else, she could have totally ratted me out or

told, but she didn't. I've absorbed her whole job with no support.

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During her time at her new institution, another informal mentor emerged for Shani in making connections:

He offered to kind of like mentor me and answer questions going through this program. I have met with him a couple of times and he's introduced me, "Get your coat on; we're going over to this office, to somebody else who's also done her doctorate." And I've gone to lunch with her a few times. So that's the kind of person I am. That's how I've engaged. I also don't approach it as, "I'm going to complain." Because that's not really my style. And I know that everybody else does the complaining to him, but I still try to be very diplomatic and then, if it's pertinent and it's very important, that's one thing, but I kind of, I don't need to tell him; he already knows.

Megan's informal mentor took her seriously from day one and let Megan "take the reins and just like figure it out and present it to her. She was onboard right away." Megan attributes the informal mentorship based on "a really good job of listening and validating my feelings and helping me think through, like here's something to try, based on what context she has that I don't. Megan describes herself, "I'm at my best when I can take something and run with it and come for feedback instead of being micromanaged."

Informal Mentorship Summary. Informal mentors played an important role in the newcomers' experiences, specifically in the socialization process. Informal mentors helped the newcomers gain knowledge about the institution and feel a sense of belonging. Informal mentors came to the newcomers through an organic process. Informal mentors created structure, made introductions, provided encouragement, and made time for newcomers. In one case, a retiree provided informal mentorship and in another, a tenured employee of 50 years

served as an informal mentor. In just one case, a newcomer experienced two informal mentors. 130

Informal mentorship in the connection stage of onboarding relates to other elements of connection. Informal mentors sparked introductions, broke down newcomer challenges, help to build relationships and trust and made connections in the work area and around campus. Informal mentors provided support. Mentorship for newcomers can be an institutional strategy, moving from a passive onboarding process to a proactive onboarding strategy. In this study, informal mentorship led to newcomers who either aspired to a new role, learned about the institution, was given intentional time and attention, or met others and found additional support and resources across campus. Other participants did not mention an informal mentor, but rather, other employees who made an impact, such as frontline employees.

Frontline

Onboarding includes a connection stage which includes the vital interpersonal relationships and information networks new employees must establish (Bauer, 2010). A significant theme to emerge within the connections building block was newcomers' interactions with frontline colleagues. Newcomers explained why these were the key people to know. Frontline people were pivotal in the newcomers' success. They were the first to respond, lend a hand and be there. Examples included administrative assistants, retirees, members of the hiring team, students, and custodians.

Ally compared her access to a vice-president and her colleagues at the campus hub. She knew she could learn more about the student experience from the frontline of the campus hub. Eric also named institutional co-workers he had direct access to. Among them, he named custodians as important people to know:

Well, what did they say about retention? If a kid is hurting walking down the hall and

they pass a custodian, if that custodian can make a connection and if that custodian was 131
told about the importance of that connection.

Matt also counted maintenance workers and custodial staff as important people to know early on:

Those are the people really getting work done. The schedule and stuff gets to me sometimes. But at the end of the day, I'm training teams and doing computer work, writing programs or attending to the daily operations of the facility. But you know, these others have gone around and cleaned toilets or fixed broken stuff. They're the ones getting real work done around here. Those are the people that I've met because they're just right across the hall from me. I always have to borrow cleaning supplies and mops and things like that.

Krista mentioned a retiree who assisted her as a newcomer and was still extremely connected to the institution. She also mentioned a student who helped answer questions with new students that Krista could not answer. That exchange, in turn, taught Krista and helped to make further connections as a newcomer. Megan also named peers across campus who were not in leadership roles or authority figures in her area. Shani mentioned a member of the hiring team that reached out and helped Shani make connections once she arrived on campus.

The final frontline example mentioned was administrative assistants to the President and Provost. Eric shared, "You watch a provost secretary or president secretary, there's the power right there." He referred to the way the administrative assistant positions hold power with their supervisors' calendars. The ability to make meaningful connections is sometimes made possible by the frontline support staff.

Frontline Colleagues Summary. Participants were especially quick and energized to mention the connections they made with frontline colleagues. Whether the frontline employee

was in a position of authority, or they were in a behind the scenes role of the institution, the way¹³² they helped the newcomer connect was impactful. They also served as examples of how to relate to students and other employees in offering assistance or support. The lack of a proactive onboarding strategy was apparent, but this organic, human outreach was especially meaningful for the newcomers.

The connection with frontline colleagues relates to other elements of connections due to the organic nature of the frontline connections. Introductions were made naturally. The frontline employees assisted the newcomers with challenges or in building relationships, either in the unit or across campus. Trust was established in working with the frontline employee and building connections as a newcomer. The newcomers felt supported and learned from frontline colleagues. Other participants named significant people in their newcomer experience. The term frontline was not used in each experience, but the idea of similar roles, closest to serving the students was usually the case in informal mentorship, connections made in the community or across campus, and in other examples.

The frontline employees made time for the newcomers. Institutions can learn from this and create an intentional institutional strategy around this internal customer service aspect of servant leadership. Peers supporting peers. Socialization occurred when newcomers began to feel a sense of belonging and began to make sense of their role and the relationships they were building. Connections with frontline colleagues was an organic process which impacted newcomers at a very high level. The emotion and immediate reflection from participants regarding this topic were evident. They understood frontline workers had pivotal roles in connections made as newcomers at their institutions.

Connections in the onboarding process refer to the interpersonal relationships and introductions to networks newcomers must establish. In this stage, newcomers begin to feel a sense of belonging in the institution through the support provided by others. All newcomers shared different experiences of support as part of the connection stage of onboarding.

Newcomers found meaningful connections through the support of others. Insiders served as listeners, sound boards, encouragers. The passive onboarding processes led to both positive and negative experiences during the connection stage of onboarding.

Karen shared an example of early support and how that support evolved within her unit:

It was not the easiest transition, but I had a lot of help and support along the way. When I first started, since I was still in a different area at that time, I met the person who was covering for that area and we went out to coffee and chatted and I'm thinking "Oh great, we're going to be great friends." And then, I got back to the office and realized that was polar opposite of how they act. Then I realized this other person is also new, so I reached out to her, and she and I've had similar experiences as far as like coming here and life in general.

Karen's initial support connection was not what it seemed. She eventually found support from another newcomer and began to adjust more smoothly into her role.

Krista found support within her area. She also mentioned her years of experience, which may mean she needed a different level of support in comparison to someone younger:

I think since the department's kind of small, that automatically became a support system. Our administrative assistant is very friendly, and she's very interested in the students. So, we come from the same background. I would say, I'm still working on that though. I'm

able to talk to the department chair sometimes. I get along with the Dean quite fine, but 134

I'm not sure that I feel comfortable using her as I might be able to as a support. I feel like in order to go and get support from her, I'd have to explain so much.

Krista's connection early on was through the support of the administrative assistant. Support is an important aspect of a newcomer making connections and feeling a sense of belonging. Eric asked questions and gained the support he needed:

I was fortunate enough to be surrounded by people who can help you with that. I learned early on, just ask the stupid questions. Somebody will say, "That happened to me, too." I think too, and I still do it, being away from the database system for many years, you step back in, you're like, "What the heck?" Asking some of those questions...unfortunately, with those data systems, there's no training. There just isn't. One day a woman in our office gave me this little bendable koala bear. I said, 'How nice. What's this?' She replied 'No, you don't get it. Koala bears eat eucalyptus leaves, which are poisonous to most other animals.' She said, 'Your department is like that. You have to take in all of the bad vibes and things from people and stay positive and keep moving.' I just thought, wow, 'I wish I knew where that koala is right now.'

Support from insiders was important in Eric making a connection to people and also to his work.

This example is from an early connection and story of support that stayed with him.

Shani also talked positively about the support she received as a newcomer in making connections:

One of the women was on my hiring committee. I just knew from talking with her when she did the initial setting stuff up, in fact, in the beginning I thought she was going to be my boss, but that is not the case, but she was just very genuine and nice. She and her

husband invited us out to eat. I work with her, and we are actually both “I’s” in the DISC¹³⁵ assessment. We are very similar in how we work.

Shani experienced connection through support during the hiring process. Newcomer experiences begin during the interview process, where early connections may occur. An insider from the earliest interaction of an interview continued to make connections in order support Shani as the newcomer.

Megan found support from those who took her under their wing while she wrestled with her role and making connections outside her area:

Another colleague just started a month ago who I’ve gotten very close with very fast. On one hand, I feel like I have the picture of how I’m going to keep moving forward, where I’m taking on more and more leadership, how I’m growing. And on the other hand, I don’t know if I’m ever going to get that picture because it feels like I’m getting more and more minimized.

The support Megan experienced through her connection with another colleague was important to her. The insider could provide a deeper level of connection through her support of Megan while Megan strived to perform her job. In this example, a newcomer who experienced meaningful connections through support felt a sense of belonging during a time her professional role felt uncertain.

Support Summary. Support for newcomers was found in a variety of roles across campus. Administrative assistants, supervisors and other co-workers provided support. The larger take-away from this section is that support from an insider within the organization sometimes created a connection. Support came in many forms for newcomers, but without a formal onboarding process, a proactive onboarding strategy did not occur, and the newcomers

were tasked to find support in the earliest days, months, and year. Support in the connection phase related to the other elements of connections. Introductions were made, as was the case of the hiring committee member who went on to make an introduction and socialize with the new hire. Support came from making the newcomer feel welcome and comfortable to ask questions. Support came from building relationships and sharing stories. Oftentimes the frontline employee, such as an administrative assistant was the one person a newcomer looked to for support in making connections. And finally, informal mentors provided support as the role suggests. Other participants did not discuss the topic of support in making connections. It was evident through the interviews whether newcomers felt they had support in making connections through onboarding. Support for newcomers was an organic process. There were no examples of the institution providing support through an onboarding strategy.

Summary of Connection. In research of how connections are made by student support professionals in the onboarding process, six themes emerged. Newcomers reflected on the importance of introductions in making connections in their area. They also shared challenges that arose which offered opportunities to make connections. Building relationships through connections was an important part of the newcomer experience. Trust became a high commodity for newcomers, specifically with supervisors. Feeling a sense of belonging on campus and in the greater community were equally important.

One of the most unique outcomes of this study of connections was understanding frontline employees as connectors. The concept that a janitor, maintenance worker or administrative assistant could be the deepest connection for a newcomer is an inspiring point. While informal mentors made a significant impact on newcomers, support was sometimes lacking for newcomers. There were stark differences in the levels of support among participants.

While one participant had a retiree make introductions and provide a list of people she needed to¹³⁷ meet, most participants were not so fortunate. Participants made connections on their own, with those they felt were most approachable. Participants with support in making connections were much happier with their overall experience as a newcomer than those without the support. The institutional support was lacking in all experiences, with no formal introductions or mentoring available.

The passive onboarding strategies of institutions throughout this study of the connection stage were magnified. The experiences pointed to informal onboarding, as newcomers learned their roles without an organizational plan (Zahrly & Tosi, 1989). An organic socialization process occurred as newcomers made connections through volunteers in their organization or mostly on their own. This social construct is an ongoing sensemaking process. Newcomers were introduced to the critical elements of the institution's culture while connecting to their professional network (Ashforth & Saks, 1995). Newcomers learned their roles while connecting with other across the organization. This research allowed for reflection and sensemaking of what truly occurred in making early connections in the institutions. Newcomers made meaning out of their experience to share with others.

The themes represented in the study of connections carries into and amplifies the data. Making connections on campuses and in the community was difficult for most participants. There were a variety of experiences. None pointed to one campus representative or intentional effort to help newcomers make connections. The socialization phase and feeling a sense of belonging was an important expectation for newcomers. The six themes within the research of connections relate to each other as participants sought connections independently and organically.

Question 3: How is Institutional Culture Understood?

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In this section, I discuss findings related to the third research question, “How do student support professionals understand the culture of the institution through the onboarding process?”

Culture is the fourth stage of the onboarding process with the goal of newcomers gaining knowledge of the institutional culture. Also during this stage, newcomers define shared goals and minimize conflict. It is during this stage that newcomers find their place within the culture. Culture is a broad category that includes providing employees with a sense of organizational norms—both formal and informal (Bauer, 2010). Culture involves the spoken and unspoken institutional “rules of the game” as key components of socialization and effective onboarding processes. Culture reproduces itself as new members enter the group. Outcomes that can occur through this reproduction process include total conformity, partial conformity, and total rejection.

In this study, the culture stage was an on-going organic process, left to newcomer interpretation. There was no real onboarding or orientation to the culture. Due to the lack of a formal onboarding process, newcomers responded to the third research question with caution. Shani asked, “So by values and beliefs, what do you mean by that?” Matt responded, “I’m having trouble with that question.” Krista replied “I would say not many agreed upon values.” Karen shared, “I didn’t get that here, but I did at my previous institution.” Megan responded in the form of a disclaimer, “Not sure if this is directly beliefs or values, but it is connected to me.”

There was one result to the research question. The newcomers’ view of culture was developed organically within a piece of the organization. It was not developed due to an intentional onboarding process provided by the institution. Culture was shared with

newcomers through normal, organic organizational processes, rather than a formal onboarding practice. Newcomers gained knowledge and understanding of institutional culture, or culture within their areas, through communication, supervisors, and administrative systems.

Communication

Three newcomers shared their understanding of values and beliefs conveyed in their specific areas through an informal manner of meetings and conversations. Brenda observed a variety of values in her unit:

Well, from day one, or even when I interviewed, I knew that customer service was probably the biggest value. Well customer service and then accuracy and being good stewards of federal and state or financial aid funds. And I could tell just from my observations of how people interacted with the students, that customer service was one of the main values.

The culture of the specific unit within the institution was interpreted through actions of insiders in the same unit. Invitations to meetings also helped Brenda understand her unit's values of helping students and serving students better

In our conversations and meetings, we've talked about what can we do to help serve students better, and help them get through the process, and make things less scary for them. Sometimes people seem to fear financial aid and we try to help them know that we're not a scary office. We're very helpful. We want to help you pay for college.

Meeting interactions solidified a unified approach to serving students in Brenda's unit. The office culture also aided in Brenda's interpretation of the values within her unit:

I think the culture of the office is that everybody's here to be a part of a team to help the

student and that everybody has input, but we have the overall, when we're processing 140

financial aid, we have federal guidelines that we need to follow. There are decisions that need to be made, but we have to make them within policy and interpreting policy.

Knowing that I can make a decision and that I have a good relationship with my supervisor, our offices are right by each other. I'm constantly going in there. She taught me most of how to do my job because the person that retired, I was fortunate to be able to start training with her before she left.

The open door policy in Brenda's unit was formative in her interpretation of the values and sharing of information within her area. She felt supported and equipped due to the symbolic office structure.

Ally shared a unique and positive reflection around values created by meeting invitations from her vice-president who was also new:

We sort of created our own set of values and mission through a clear direction from the vice president, I guess, I would say that was in meetings. She's done a great job of doing individual meetings, but also the meeting we had this morning is sort of a huddle of all the folks. The actual values themselves I think are well agreed upon. Then it's the 'how to get there' and 'how to' you know?

Ally reflected on her understanding of the unit's culture based on meetings with her supervisor and others from the work unit. The consistency in agreed upon values created a foundation for the unit to move forward into action plans.

When asked how the newcomers experienced communication provided by the institution and within their areas, newcomers responded quickly. Heather shared her opinion:

The university sucks at communicating. I would say the state system is even worse¹⁴¹ at communicating. I don't know that there's a university that's great at communicating...and I think because there was this huge disconnect between what's actually happening on campus and what's coming down from the system. Heather believed the state-wide organization was responsible for lack of communication and the trickle-down to the institution.

As newcomers, Brenda and Ally found the communication methods in their units to be helpful. Ally reflected on the entire communication process, from the top-down. She reflected more positively on the communication process as a newcomer:

We have this weekly huddle that the VP developed, she hears from all of us individually so that we can hear what other people are doing this seems contradictory. We have several times caught things like, "I wouldn't have known you were working on that, but that connects with this over here."

Brenda had weekly 30-minute meetings that also created open communication in the workplace:

I think it's a very open place that people feel comfortable having a constructive discussion about something and not always having to agree about maybe putting a different spin on the scenario, different ideas. I don't see a ton of disagreement in our office. I haven't really sensed any major disagreements along that line

Weekly meetings provided an effective, organic communication method and insight into the culture of the unit.

Newcomers also learned through experiences when disagreements, or break-downs in communication occurred as well. When disagreement arose in Mary's unit,

conversations were not held in the open:

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And then disagreements were shushed conversations in people's offices. But it was kind of weird, because at first, and I guess this probably happens every place, everybody was smiling. Yes, we love everything. Yes, we're all in agreement. It is hard when you feel like you're loyal to a person so you can't disagree.

Mary understood the unit's communication style and culture to be loyal and public-facing, always in agreement. This organic process of learning the culture was not a positive experience for her. In this example, the newcomer learned she should not disagree publicly within her unit.

In reflection of communication and how disagreements were handled, Matt described his unit as competitive and straight-forward: "It's like we're all competitors. We all want to win. Everyone just has kind of a different way of going about it. It's been great because I've been able to voice disagreements with certain coaches already without fearing that." Matt understood the culture in his unit to be a competitive yet fair space to voice disagreements as a newcomer.

Communication Summary. Since institutional culture was not an intentional part of the newcomer introduction, newcomers shared what they interpreted as values and beliefs within their immediate areas through verbal and non-verbal communication, often, through meetings, observations and conversations. Newcomers picked up some knowledge of the culture in meetings that were not intended for only newcomers. When the unit met to discuss topics, it provided an organic forum for newcomers to learn about the unit culture.

How the institution or unit communicated and how disagreements were handled

were also important aspects for newcomers to reflect on. As newcomers made sense of their¹⁴³ experiences, they also made meaning of the values of the institution through interpretation. This organic process was on-going throughout the newcomers' experience. Newcomers learned the culture, through both positive and negative experiences, but not through intentional sensegiving by supervisors or insiders in their units. The newcomers were provided an organic introduction and integration into their unit.

Supervisor Influence

Supervisors were a key part of the newcomer experience related to understanding culture. As newcomers navigated their places within the culture, supervisors introduced the unit culture, organically, through their actions. An open-door policy was one unspoken component of the newcomer experience. Meeting invitations also added to the organic process of understanding the culture. Interactions with supervisors that revolved around mission clarification and values within the unit were important in the newcomer experiences.

As newcomers interpreted cultural values within their specific areas early on, participants commented on how values were communicated. Shani reflected on how she learned the values within her area. She believed the values and beliefs of the office were not communicated clearly from the start, specifically from her unit supervisors:

So, the values and beliefs...there were maybe two things that were communicated when I did them and was in trouble or wrong. One was changing your lunch hour. Asking if you could move your lunch due to a doctor's appointment at the end of the day, and it was, "no, we can't change our working hours." This is a totally different culture from the institution I came from, where I would compare that to being like a latch key kid, and then here is like, you're locked in. The values and beliefs of that office are communicated

by fear by a leader who's obviously not comfortable leading and doesn't want to or care. 144

And then things are communicated when you've done something wrong. I mean it's just, people tattletale for things.

Shani reflected on a lack of trust and communication. She experienced an organic, informal introduction to the culture, which was a negative experience for her.

Heather interpreted her experiences of culture within her area. Her supervisor came to the role from within, which created credibility and trust in the supervisor by the whole unit:

I feel like there is that consistency in our department of everybody always looking out for each other and trying to make sure nobody's falling. I think this was one of the things, so the agreed upon values are clear.

That culture of trust was apparent to Heather upon arrival. Her supervisor accepted feedback and the communication lines were open.

Mary also believed her supervisor's values were the office's values. However, this was not a positive culture connection as a newcomer:

My supervisor expressed his values and the values of the office. A lot of times those came out in staff meetings, but I think my supervisor and I had some long conversations as well. It was expressed early on that there's a level of tradition at this institution. And so, we do things because this is how we've always done them. And there's all these ways we must do it because this is how everybody expects us to do these things. And that was frustrating.

Mary understood the unit's values to be those of her supervisor. Learning the language and understanding the politics, goals and values are all part of the culture onboarding stage (Bauer, 2010). Mary was not introduced to the important offices she would interact with. She

believed her supervisor's values were the values of the entire office.

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The supervisor served as an example for both Heather and Mary. However, Mary's supervisor set the culture through a firm hold on traditions of the university and processes which Mary questioned. She instead considered what could be done differently as part of the culture she had just joined. Ally experienced a culture created together by the team members. Brenda found customer service and a focus on the students to be the culture of her area. Karen experienced teamwork as the culture within her area. Participants' reflections of the culture and values within the institution and within the individual areas varied greatly. No participants discussed an intentional onboarding strategy focused on culture.

Newcomers learned values within their individual areas, through spoken and unspoken examples. Systems and structure led Matt to a unique position. He no longer reported directly to a coach. He interpreted values of independence and autonomy within his role. The supervisory structure was a positive example of empowerment for Matt:

I think that's why I wanted to take this job, compared to any other. I would be a head strength coach in title, but really, let's say I was at Michigan or something, I'd be the football strength coach. Well, I'm not really, I'm the head strength coach for conditioning, but I'm reporting to the head football coach. If there is a disagreement or something, I might have to do something that I don't believe in.

Matt developed an understanding of the culture within the athletic department, rather than through the institution.

Supervisor Influence Summary. Supervisors were important insiders as newcomers sought to understand the culture within their units. Positive actions supervisors took with newcomers, such as invitations to meetings, open door policies and examples of customer

service were important aspects of the newcomer experience. Clarifying goals and priorities were¹⁴⁶ also efforts made by supervisors through meetings and interactions. Serving students and being available was a recurring theme newcomers interpreted from the influence of their supervisors. Supervisors' values sometimes became the values of the entire unit. This was both positive and negative, depending on the circumstance. Supervisors also had a negative effect on two newcomers in an environment where fear and loyalty was cited in two separate examples.

Administrative Systems/Previous Experiences

Five newcomers cited systems within their institutions that defined the culture. The bureaucracy and autocratic control at the system level had some impact on procedures and even culture at the institutional level. Newcomer expectations, based on previous experiences, did not match up with the bureaucratic, state system-controlled experiences.

The resources, computer and staffing systems felt inefficient and outdated. Mary was curious about the software used in her area:

I don't know that it was one moment, but there was a spell where I was learning what materials we use, what software we use. And we're still using paper applications, and we still use these archaic contact cards, and we talk to families off of page-by-page in a book. All stuff that other schools don't do. And then Hobson's Connect (the admissions management software mandated by the state system office) is also like an older, not great piece of software.

Mary's prior experiences were unlike her current experiences as she developed understanding of culture within her unit through the outdated systems in place.

Shani also shared, "I'm dealing with a very archaic system - all paper." The paper system in both examples may have reflected the lack of resources in computer systems. Shani's

newcomer experience was not what she expected. Heather questioned the antiquated structure in¹⁴⁷ her staffing experience, “You have what now? Faculty advisors? Nobody can wrap their head, that’s so old school.” She expected something more from the administrative system than the idea of faculty serving as advisors. She also came from a much larger institution previously.

Ally reflected on the students who wanted to return after being gone from the institution. The response by the institution, around student success, seemed obvious to her: “There’s a process. And students are coming back, it’s not hard and it doesn’t cost staff anything, but staff may fall short in the transition as a student is coming back, and nobody has really thought about tackling that.” Ally believed the institution should have a process for the students returning to the same institution. Her previous experience included a process for such students. In her current role, because there was no system to reference, she felt like the staff in her area would not be able to accommodate students to make a smooth transition occur. It was not complicated. She had experience from her previous institution and expected more from the administrative systems at her current institution.

Ally had another example of an administrative system that was not effective. She was involved with a team responsible for placing signs around campus for the student success office:

The process for placing the sign was disconnected and I was the person who first said, “I think it’s a great idea.” It wasn’t that they were resistant to it. It’s like, “Well, we hadn’t done it before.” So, “We’d better ask these seven other areas to make sure it’s okay with them.”

Ally was interested in making a change in efforts to notify students around campus. She was met with a resistance based on the institution’s previous lack of experience with relevant procedures as simple as placing a sign.

were either poorly resourced, controlled or burdened by bureaucracy. Newcomers cited outdated software and database programs as their first impression of their institutions. Paper versus electronic processes were other examples. Student support processes were lacking for students returning to the same institution after some time away. The archaic nature of the newcomer experiences described by three newcomers, reflects Tinto's posit that environment matters in understanding institutional culture as part of onboarding. The way, in higher education, in which the campus area is "resourced" reflects the culture. As the newcomers made meaning from the outdated resources and processes, compared to their previous experiences, they also began to understand and interpret the culture of their areas. The newcomers were not taught these systems; they simply created their own understanding based on organic experiences.

Summary of Culture. Newcomers did not experience the Four C's onboarding building block of culture through intentional institutional efforts. Instead, newcomers were on their own to make sense of the culture within their areas. They did so in an organic way. Newcomers described how they understood the culture through communication, supervisors, and administrative systems. They reflected on both the positive and negative aspects of these informal, organic experiences. For some newcomers, there was a sense of belonging from the start, due to the culture of their unit. For others, culture was represented by unspoken rules, outdated systems, and politics.

Previous experiences played a large role in newcomers as they made meaning from their experiences. Because they had something to compare their experiences to, they knew things were different or lacking. The lack of a proactive onboarding process meant newcomers did not identify with the institution through the culture of the institution. The storytelling, environment,

wellbeing, and institutional saga aspects of culture could have played a larger role in the newcomer experiences through an intentional onboarding process provided by the institution. Institutions could provide a formal socialization process as part of the fourth stage of onboarding, culture, in which all newcomers are introduced to the institution as a group, rather than introduced to a work group immediately. This would be an opportunity to provide institutional history, share facts and basic information about the institution and welcome newcomers intentionally through exchange of information. Understanding the goals and values of the institution and learning the institution's terminology are part of newcomer adjustment and later define commitment, satisfaction, and turnover (Chao, et al, 1994).

Synthesis

In this qualitative study, participants were asked to share their onboarding experiences as student support professionals in higher education. Newcomers openly shared examples and stories about their experiences. Bauer's 4 C's of onboarding (2010) provided a framework for my research questions around the overall onboarding experience, including compliance, clarification, connection, and culture. I also asked questions specific to how newcomers made connections and how institutional culture was understood. The conceptual frameworks of socialization and sensemaking also aided in framing research questions.

My first research question focused on how newcomers experienced onboarding. The socialization framework was helpful in clustering the newcomers' stages of expectation, knowledge and belonging (Noe, 2005). Bauer's 4'C's of onboarding provided a structure for identification of onboarding strategy. Newcomers described a passive onboarding strategy throughout the study. This checklist of "unrelated tasks to be completed" (Bauer, 2010) was experienced by some and not by others. There was a lack of structure in the compliance stage as

a standard experience. Newcomers experienced some role clarification but nothing formal. There⁵⁰ was no formal means of connection with insiders and little or no institutional culture shared. The anticipatory, or expectation, phase of socialization was described as newcomers shared how they learned about the work and interacted within the organization (Bauer, 2004).

Weick's sensemaking framework helped to cluster responses as newcomers made meaning and reflected, often for the first time, on their onboarding experience. This sensemaking process, during their experiences as well as during reflections, was important as they shared personal stories and interpretations of their experiences. Again, the conceptual frameworks of onboarding, socialization and sensemaking helped to cluster responses and draw conclusions for higher education professionals to consider. Responses supported the theme of organic experiences, rather intentional institutional processes. Most of the participants shared examples of their commitment to the process as newcomers, with few examples of the institution's commitment to the onboarding process.

My second research question focused on the how newcomers experienced connections during onboarding. Again, through passive onboarding strategy on the part of the institution, participants made meaning of their connections through introductions, challenges, building relationships, informal mentorships, frontline colleagues, and support. Newcomers met others in organic manners, both inside their areas, their institutions and in their communities. Newcomer responses pointed to manager behaviors that encouraged and discouraged connections. The responses also reiterated the idea of an orientation experience rather than an onboarding experience. The socialization that occurred was informal as newcomers were part of their work groups immediately.

My third research question focused on how the newcomers experienced culture.

Participants made meaning of how they experienced culture through communication, supervisors⁵¹ and administrative systems. Past experiences created expectations for some newcomers that were not met, relative to understanding the culture. Newcomers developed an understanding of culture within their units through organic processes.

In the responses to all three research questions, newcomers identified formal and informal organizational norms. Participants shared the spoken and unspoken rules as they made sense of their experiences. The newcomers' institutions were not involved in intentional, or proactive, onboarding processes. Again, the responses referenced examples of organic experiences, with no intentional onboarding strategy through the institutions. This supports a general claim of an organic process, supported by sufficient examples throughout the data.

The interpretation in gaining fuller understanding of how onboarding was experienced, involves deeper attention to the details in the responses, making connections in the responses, and noticing patterns. The relationships the newcomers experienced early on at their institutions were key in the onboarding experience. In conclusion, Bauer's 4'Cs of onboarding stages of Compliance, Clarification, Connection and Culture, served as a strong framework to draw conclusions from newcomers to benefit future onboarding initiatives within higher education.

Summary

In chapter four, the participants shared their onboarding experiences. As newcomers, they had varied expectations, based on previous experiences at other institutions. Overarching themes that emerged from the interviews conducted included a desire to make connections early on, a desire to build relationships and find support. Newcomers found support from unlikely sources, such as frontline employees, retirees and informal mentors. These connections were made through organic interactions, rather than intentional onboarding processes provided by the

institution. Passive onboarding strategies were common throughout each newcomer's story. As 152 newcomers shared personal stories of their experiences, emotions came to the surface. As they made meaning out of the stories they shared, they began to show passion around their understanding.

Overall, I found the participants were proactive in making connections and making sense of institutional culture. This organic process was sometimes uncomfortable for newcomers. Participants did not have examples of intentional onboarding experiences in making connections or understanding the culture of the institution. The shared experiences add to the understanding and research of onboarding in higher education. The organic processes described through the interviews point to a gap in institutional strategy around proactive onboarding as an investment in newcomers. In the next chapter, I will discuss the findings, the limitations of this study, the implications for practice and the need for further research.

“We never know how our small activities will affect others through the invisible fabric of our connectedness. In this exquisitely connected world, it’s never a question of ‘critical mass.’ It’s always about critical connections.” — Grace Lee Boggs

The purpose of this study was to investigate how student support professionals experience onboarding. In Chapter I, I presented the rationale for the study, through exploration of the socialization and onboarding processes, beyond paperwork, policies and payroll (Caruth et al, 2010). In Chapter II, I presented literature to support the rationale through the conceptual frameworks of socialization, sensemaking and onboarding. In Chapter III, I explained the methodology used in gathering data for the study. In Chapter IV, I presented results for each research question, using three conceptual frameworks: Bauer’s 4 C’s of onboarding (2010), Noe’s stages of socialization (2005), and Weick’s sensemaking (1979) to gather the responses. Chapter V will include my conclusions of this data, along with limitations of the study, implication for theory, practice, and future research.

Conclusions

Using the word frequency query in NVIVO 12, the words “know”, “think” and “people” were the three most often used words throughout the interview. This reflects the notion that newcomers were given an opportunity to share how they experienced their individual institutions and began to make sense of the experience and the people they encountered. The participants made meaning out of their experiences through this qualitative study. I found this query tool to be extremely affirming to the research. The main findings for each research question are detailed below.

I began the interview by asking how the newcomers were introduced to the workplace and how the workplace was introduced to the newcomers. While responses revealed experiences which included a gap in introductions, newcomers also shared organic introductions which occurred due to the motivation of the newcomers, retirees, informal mentors, and frontline workers. In most responses, a formal introduction to the university or workplace did not occur. Additionally, the majority of the newcomers mentioned their onboarding was significantly different from previous experiences. This meaning making occurred as newcomers reflected on the expectations they held for their new experience.

Expectations played a large role in the onboarding experience. The disappointment and unmet expectations in making connections was very apparent for most participants. In some cases, the participants with the most years in higher education were the least affected by the lack of opportunities to make connections. It may have been due to their expectations not being as high as some of the newcomers who were in earlier stages of their careers.

The second conclusion I drew from the research is how the newcomers experienced the first stage of onboarding, compliance. I asked the question in the context of what information was shared with newcomers and how the information was conveyed. This included basic themes regarding paperwork, phone, timing, parking, and policy. Some newcomers shared frustration concerning the lack of basic information provided. Things as simple as computer passwords, work attire, parking information and workspace policies could have been addressed early on. The lack of an intentional onboarding process left newcomers feeling unsure and uncomfortable in their new roles. I can conclude, based on newcomer responses, that newcomers who experienced some structure in the compliance phase felt more positively about their experience, while those

who navigated the process organically, asked questions and remained committed to finding the 155 answers, were still unhappy with the lack of structure.

The third conclusion I drew from the research is around the clarification stage of the onboarding process. Supervisors played a significant role in the way newcomers made meaning of their new role at the institution. There were positive stories of supervisors who went out of their way to make sure the newcomer was adjusting to the workplace and responsibilities. Some even gave the newcomers responsibilities to review and even rewrite policies and procedures within the area. There were also negative stories about supervisors who did not make time to train or support the newcomers in their work. Newcomers learned the ropes from their peers in an organic, ask-as-you-go method. One newcomer was reprimanded early on for reaching out to another department for technology support without first asking permission. This was a harsh first impression in starting a position without a reference point.

Finally, the more important conclusion I drew from the first research question was the idea of feeling welcomed to the institution. The newcomers who were given tours and introduced had much different stories to tell than those who did not feel seen or welcomed in their first days. Office locations, start dates, and lack of communication had some newcomers feeling at a disadvantage from day one. It set the tone for their experience. For some, it was baptism by fire as they were immediately immersed in the work at hand with little time for tours, introductions or review of basic institutional or work area policies. Knowing where to park and what time to take lunch were simple things that turned into negative first impressions.

Question 2: How are Connections Made through the Onboarding Process?

My second question focused on how newcomers made connections as part of the onboarding process. The next conclusion I drew from my research was that connections were

mostly made organically by the newcomers. Introductions were provided for a handful of newcomers. Newcomers expected to be welcomed and find ways to connect through the institution. When this did not occur, they were able to make connections organically, even without the formal onboarding experiences. The extreme examples were passive onboarding strategy where no one person was responsible for newcomers making connections. One supervisor announced the newcomer via email before the newcomer arrived on campus. Once on campus, the supervisor made face to face introductions.

The connections made on campus and in the community pointed to the newcomers' efforts and desire to feel a sense of belonging. A newcomer felt comfortable in the work connections made but was uncertain about being able to make connection in the community due to living so far away. Another newcomer did not have housing arranged and was able to live on campus until his family could move.

The support experienced by newcomers came in many different forms. Frontline employees were extremely important to newcomers making connections at the institutions. Informal mentors made newcomers feel welcomed and made introductions to key individuals. Those who made spontaneous invitations to newcomers to join them for lunch or an outing after work made a significant impact on the newcomers and the connections made.

Finally, building relationships and trust was a top priority for the newcomers as they navigated their new roles, new institution, and new community. The time and effort building relationships required was a significant part of the newcomer experience. The presence of a formal onboarding process with intentional means of making connections would have expedited the socialization process for newcomers in a dramatic way. The emotion and effort spent in finding their way and feeling like they belonged was a key take away as I listened to their stories.

Emotions rose to the surface when describing moments of thanksgiving for the support and opportunities to connect as well as for the disappointment in not making rich connections from the start.

Question 3: How is the Institutional Culture Understood?

The final research question was specific to how newcomers began to understand the culture of the institution and their areas. Values, communication, and archaic systems led me to three main conclusions around institutional culture as part of the onboarding process. The values of the institution and work area are formed through storytelling and narratives of insiders. Supervisors and peers created the starting point for newcomers to make meaning and create their own understanding of the culture. What was shared through communication at meetings, in writing, through actions and in method, created first impressions for newcomers to relate to.

The passive onboarding strategy of each institution represented in this study reflects a missed opportunity to share cultural meanings with newcomers. The history, tradition, mission and values of the institution remained unknown for the newcomers in this study. References were made to work area themes or values of customer service and teamwork. Serving students was mentioned as a common cultural theme. On the other hand, there were also themes of disagreement and lack of communication. The archaic work systems due to traditions, lack of resources or a combination of both, led newcomers to consider the culture to be antiquated and inflexible. The goal of newcomers was to find their fit, understand the culture and belong. The lack of an intentional onboarding experience with focus on culture was noticed through the lack of depth in response to this research question. Newcomers could not report on what they did not experience.

Finally, expectations were mentioned as some newcomers had experienced different

aspects of institutional workplace culture at their previous institutions that they did not experience in their new institution. Themes such as the mission of the institution, service projects and time off to serve were imbedded into the work. There was a theme of institutional commitment and loyalty newcomers held from previous institutions that was brought up in comparison throughout the interviews.

Discussion

This study explored the onboarding experience, including the relationship between the employee and the organization, the entry process and a sense of belonging within the organization, and how the newcomer makes sense of the onboarding experience. These themes situate within the socialization, sensemaking and onboarding frameworks. As these frameworks continually spiral within one another simultaneously, it was up to me as the researcher to ask the right questions in order for newcomers to reflect and make meaning out of their experiences.

The overarching theme throughout the study is that onboarding remained an organic, complex experience for the newcomer. Newcomers were far more responsible than the institution for the onboarding building blocks of clarification, compliance, connection, and culture. The most common experiences newcomers easily related to, especially in terms of the institution's role, were related to the compliance and clarification stages. Beyond that, connection and culture stages were on the shoulders of the newcomer unless there was an informal mentor involved. The support the newcomers sought out on their own was the key ingredient to keep them at the institution. Stories revealed the highs and lows of being a newcomer. As participants shared their stories, there was often emotion and deep reflection, which indicated they had not spoken of these experiences before the interview. It was almost a surprise that the interview would include questions beyond the paperwork and policies.

Human resources, or human capital, remains any institution's greatest asset. The needs of the individual and the needs of the organization should align. The newcomer responses pointed to a misalignment. Newcomer needs were not met on many occasions. The strategy of the institution in developing human capital would include either formal or informal onboarding practices. Every newcomer described passive, informal onboarding practices at their current institution. That means that Compliance and Clarification were the main two building blocks of onboarding experienced, which leaves culture and connection to an organic, informal chance. The Four C's of onboarding are SHRM's recommendation for a formal, proactive onboarding experience. Higher education may not be listening to that recommendation.

The third tenet of the human resources framework is relationships. Throughout the study, this is the underlying, most frequent outcome in responses. Connections are the key ingredient of the onboarding experience. Human relationship and reassurance are essential for newcomers as they look for approval and information. The newcomer's ability to make connections is what leads to a successful socialization experience.

Socialization is an examination of the relationship between the newcomer and the organization. This study revealed socialization experiences that were positive and negative, depending on the specific topic being discussed. The common denominator that was shared was the purpose of their role as student support professionals; to serve students. That was something they and their colleagues could agree upon. How to serve students was not always agreed upon. The newcomers were very clear about their purpose and also passionate about their work. The one way I could be sure of that passion was through the emotion in their voices, the tears in their eyes, or the silence that some questions created. Conversely, there was joy and energy that was shared while talking about informal mentor relationships or a supervisor who was amazing to

work with. The one relationship piece that stuck with me the most was a statement from Megan,¹⁶⁰ when she compared her newcomer experience to that of her students. She was responsible to introduce them to the institution and to their advisors. She could relate very well to how they felt during their first days on campus as she reflected on her own first days. Eric provided an example of the socialization process. He shared that just because he was introduced to someone and told a bit more about that individual, it was still up to him to form his own relationship and opinion of that person.

The phases of socialization (Noe, 2005) are anticipation (expectation), encounter (knowledge) and settling in (belonging). The newcomers' expectations were an important part of the compliance and clarification stages, as well as connection and culture. Those who had been at previous institutions which provided a more robust newcomer experience were quick to compare and share that information during their interview. The newcomers in this study were mostly part of work groups, a more informal socialization experience. One newcomer, Shani, was more isolated while she learned her role. She was fortunate to have had an informal mentor for a short time. Secure relationships between newcomers and insiders are essential. Just as in this study, the newcomer and insider are equally responsible. Sensemaking is the next conceptual framework that this study is deeply rooted in.

Newcomers constantly made meaning throughout their experiences. Onboarding is a fluid, on-going sensemaking process (Hernes & Maitlis, 2010; Thayer, 1988). The newcomers bridged their past experiences with their current experiences. The majority of this study was dependent on the newcomer's ability to bridge those experiences, as sensemaking starts all over again. The newcomers in this study experienced change, contrast, and surprise (Louis, 1980). Change was in moving to a different institution, Contrast refers to differences that emerged in the

new situations. Surprise describes the difference between the newcomer's expectation and actual¹⁶¹ experiences in the institution. Newcomers shared several stories of unmet expectations throughout their onboarding experiences.

As I listened to responses and heard story after story, it became clear, early on, that the newcomers experienced change, contrast, and surprise. Out of all the participants, there were just two who did not seem to be very impacted by the change. The rest were able to share very candid experiences about the external, objective differences in moving to a new institution. Those with experiences at other institutions were quick to share contrasts. An early significant moment or insight about the newcomer's role or organization was quickly identified by participants.

Agents within the organization were responsible for storytelling. This is how the culture of the organization was shared with newcomers. It may have connected some newcomers to the purpose; however, the purpose is never ending. One of my favorite examples of storytelling from this study is the koala bear Eric was given by one of his direct reports. The bear eats poisonous leaves. Some roles in student support are responsible to take the uncomfortable work and make it positive. Sensemaking occurs as participants interpret and find a story within the interpretation (Tracy, 2013). Megan interpreted stories throughout the interview. It was almost like she replayed stories or conversations and processed them while she talked to me. Heather drew stories from her past and present experiences. She was quick to find positives in the stories she was telling, even when they were difficult to tell. Storytelling can be extremely personal and as one interprets, emotion can easily come to the surface. That was one aspect of the study I was not prepared for as the researcher.

Sensegiving occurs when members of the institution attempt to influence other's sensemaking about the institution, toward a preferred definition about the institutional reality

(Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). As newcomers experienced sensemaking and sensegiving, it was sometimes an overload. Megan shared the pressure of reporting to two supervisors. As she made sense of her broader newcomer experience, it was clear the supervisors were sense givers as they attempted to persuade or convince her as the newcomer through sensegiving. Sensemaking was critical to this study as newcomers interpreted the building blocks of compliance, clarification, connection, and culture. Sensemaking started as soon as the newcomers entered the organization.

Onboarding is the final conceptual framework. This study affirmed the misunderstanding of the term onboarding. The participants shared their experiences, but neither they, nor I, used the term onboarding in any part of the interview. For that intentional step, I am grateful. I believe each and every participant has simply experienced training and/or orientation, but nothing beyond that. The topics of compliance and clarification were fairly straight forward. Responses were almost predictable. However, when it came to discussing connections and culture, the responses were more thoughtful and at times, created moments of silence as the newcomer sat and considered how to respond. The idea that, at the time of the interviews, three of the participants stated they were actively seeking different positions outside of their institutions indicated we have work to do in higher education in truly onboarding newcomers. The experiences varied from a welcome party, invitations to meetings, email introductions and campus tours to, in contrast, a missing job description, no official office space, a reprimand over an email, and starting at a time when only a few coworkers were on campus.

Limitations

This section includes limitations of the research and recommendations for further research based upon the limitations. The sample group for this study was a purposeful sample of

convenience and opportunity. The study had some limits, including the sample, the student support employee definition within a state system, the onboarding topic, and the focus on just one unit within the institution.

Sample

I received a list of potential student support participants from a mid-western state system office. When I reached out to the first group of potential participants, a few responses came back with concern that they were not technically in the student support unit. While my intent was to limit the study to student support professionals, and no other roles in the university, it was interesting to me how mismatched their understanding of their role in the institution verses the identification of their role in the institution based on the state's list of job titles. This points to the section of the study which discussed definitions and how different terms have different meanings at various institutions.

Definition

The newcomer definition used was “members with relatively low tenure (Rollag, 2007). Participants joined the institution within the past year and were part of a statewide system of colleges and universities. This allowed for a broad representation of roles within student Support. While there were student support professionals from different four-year universities and departments, I could have added more diversity to my sample group. My sample group could have:

- Included more diversity in the number of years in higher education
- Included more newcomers of different ethnicities
- Included newcomers with disabilities

Another problem I encountered was the topic of onboarding itself. This study was centered around a topic that is unclear to many. The lack of shared meaning around what onboarding truly means is a problem to start with. The participants in the study who were truly familiar with onboarding in the true definition were quickly able to compare and contrast their current experience. One example that comes to mind was the student support professional who had worked at a hospital prior to entering her role in higher education. Further research could include a study of institutions and what they call their process for newcomers, and what it includes.

Newcomer Role

The study was limited to a variety of student support professionals and no other roles within the university. Future research could include professionals from additional areas within student support. For example, I did not interview anyone from Residence Life.

The study could be expanded to all higher education professionals. The study could be scaled down to a case study of one institution or one newcomer. The study revealed examples of institutions without formal onboarding processes. A study could be directed to a case study of an institution which has a formal, or proactive onboarding process, such as the 4 C's. A study could be directed to a case study of one individual, at a specific level within higher education and track the onboarding experience over a period of first several months or the first year.

Future research could also include a mixed methods study with surveys in addition to the interviews. It would be interesting to see if participants would be willing to share different information through an anonymous survey. I also recommend flipping the research and interviewing the human resource newcomers at various institutions, or even administrators, to

Implications for Theory

The Four C's was the conceptual framework for this study. It was especially useful to have a framework that identified the opportunities for the institution to support newcomers intentionally through four stages or building blocks. The findings in this study were connected to the conceptual framework of Bauer's (2010) 4 C's. The research questions came from this conceptual framework (Miles & Huberman, 1994). The results of the study are closely related to the Four C's building blocks of compliance, clarification, culture and connection. To what extent each newcomer experienced each building block is what makes the study so important. The importance of the connections and culture stages of the onboarding experience was reiterated in the responses from newcomers. Their responses also supported the socialization conceptual framework as well as the sensemaking framework. The research meets the conceptual frameworks very clearly. It is all about the relationships and how the newcomer finds meaning in past and present experiences. Connections are key. The relationship between the organization and the newcomer is the bridge to a successful onboarding experience.

Implications for Practice

Similar findings were found in one piece of research prior to this study (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Based on my literature review and study, I found my research to be similar to Keisling & Laning's (2016) study of academic librarians. There too, were gaps in literature focused on the onboarding experience of librarians. That study focused on the onboarding experience of librarians, understanding the newcomer's perspective of the experience and what they learned that was helpful. The study also looked at the librarian's signature strengths. In that study as well as this study, common responses relative to the onboarding experience pointed to

the compliance stage. Meeting with others and check-ins during onboarding would be more helpful. What struck me as most similar in comparing the studies, was the idea that the most helpful experience was meetings with key people within the institution. Connecting with other individuals rose to the topic as a key recommendation from the libraries in the study.

I have two recommendations to make to the field of higher education, and specifically student support. The first, is to focus on human resource strategy. Human resources should be involved in the institution's administration. Human resource strategy should be connected to every priority of the institution. Institutions should count human capital as the greatest asset. When people feel like they belong and are contributing to something greater than themselves, synergy occurs. The people make the place (Schneider, 1987).

The second recommendation is to focus on wellbeing as part of the onboarding experience. New student support professionals are apt to work longer hours and carry more stress. Institutions that champion wellbeing, specifically with student support newcomers, will lessen turnover rates, stress, health issues and low job satisfaction (Anderson et al., 2000). The stress and exhaustion exemplified by over half of the participants during their interviews signals an opportunity for a focus on wellbeing.

Higher education professionals may use the results of this study to improve their individual and institutional response to newcomers. In reading through the interview responses, there is a great need for improving the newcomer experience through onboarding. Institutions could recruit volunteer stakeholders who were identified newcomer mentors, allies, or guides, to assist in the onboarding process. The commitment could be for 90 days or for a full year.

At the very least, there could be some sort of a check-in process put in place with newcomers, at the 2-week, 2 months, 6 months and 9 months mark. I believe the biggest failure

in what the newcomers experienced was the lack of communication or check-in. During the interviews, it felt like I was the first one to ask them how their experience was going. The newcomer seeks knowledge, and the manager has a responsibility for the knowledge exchange, through a checklist in the earliest days, as well as the check-in within the first months, as a welcoming effort to the newcomer. Institutions should be offering peak moments (Heath & Heath, 2017) for the newcomer to remember organizational entry in a positive manner, rather than the opposite, which rose up as a theme in this study.

Implications for Research

This research fills a gap in higher education onboarding research. It also helps identify student support professionals and their onboarding experience. This study points to the organic, passive onboarding experience that many higher education professionals experience. The results suggest settings where the findings could be tested further (Miles & Huberman, 1994). There are several suggestions where future research could be done to build upon this study's findings.

First, future research might include the role of insiders socializing newcomers and the Benefits of increasing their own knowledge and role within the organization. This could also include sensegiving, as it pertains to insiders and newcomers, as a research topic. The dissonance between sensemaking, sensegiving and sense taking may be further studied as it relates to onboarding.

Second, this study's results point to findings that could be tested further (Miles & Huberman, 1994). For example, a focus on newcomers to the institution and the barriers they face, such as financial insecurity, disability or diversity would be helpful to lift up the personal challenges newcomers bring with them to the institution and to their role. These personal challenges may impact the onboarding process, no matter how thorough.

The timing of this study during a global pandemic reveals an opportunity to study how newcomers experienced onboarding during the pandemic. The socialization of newcomers is vital to their experience. Isolation and uncertainty may have lasting effects on how newcomers experience their institutions. A lack of discussion of institutional culture and traditions are even less likely to be effectively addressed in the conditions after Covid. Joining the campus community, meeting others in person versus over the computer and going through the 4 C's of onboarding during such a chaotic time has great potential for research. 168

A third suggestion for further research would be to take an onboarding model from a for-profit business and apply it to a higher education institution as a case study. A conceptual framework like the Four C's has been effective in business, but there is an opportunity to apply that same framework as a research study within higher education.

A fourth suggestion for a future study might point to an exploration of formal or information mentorship programs as an onboarding practice. It would also be interesting to investigate the way institutions define their orientation or onboarding programs. It has been very evident in this research that the terms frequently get used in error.

Fifth, there was a discomfort for some to share about their true experience. This showed they had not yet processed their experience personally or professionally, with a supervisor or peer on campus. In the interview, it took the first 20-30 minutes to begin to dig deep in reflection of what they had experienced. A case study of a newcomer journaling the onboarding experience from day one would be an impactful study.

A final study idea would be similar, capturing the onboarding experiences of presidents or administrators at four-year universities. It might take leadership at that level to have a failed or successful onboarding experience in order for the topic to take root in deeper conversation

Summary

This study is an investigation of how student support professionals experience onboarding. As I listened to responses, I understood the participants interviewed to be extremely passionate about their work, with focus on serving students. They also were interested in developing their understanding of their role, in developing professional connections, and in understanding the institutional culture.

The participants were able to share their experiences relative to the Four C's of onboarding (Bauer, 2010). Identifying experiences within compliance and clarification was fairly straight forward for participants, however, when discussing connections and culture, the pause and intentional reflection seemed to identify a gap in conversation at their own institution. Newcomers meet their own set of challenges. In most cases, those challenges served as motivators. Many of the newcomers were quick to develop a policy manual, a list of names and phone numbers of campus contacts or extend an invitation to a colleague to meet for coffee in order to build connections. Despite the challenges, the newcomers persevered.

There are several themes that come from this study. First, the lack of proactive onboarding practices, which includes all Four C's, is very obvious after having studied this phenomenon within student support. Second, it is ironic to consider the priority these professionals place in serving the students each day, yet they as newcomers are not made a priority within their institution. Third, intentional onboarding efforts would make a significant difference in the newcomer experience. Preparing institutional stakeholders to facilitate opportunities for professional connections and understanding institutional culture would be an investment of time and strategy. Higher education administrators would need to understand how

a few simple steps could fortify the newcomer experience in a very impactful way. Fourth, this is⁷⁰ not a Human Resources department assignment. The newcomers who shared positive experiences were rarely relying on the HR department to orchestrate connections or share institutional culture. That must come from relationships built within their areas, and within their campus network. Finally, onboarding must be a part of the strategic human resource objectives of the institution, to ensure the investment in newcomers through an onboarding experience that is beyond the first week, month and year. Onboarding is not a transaction, but rather a transformation from a newcomer to an insider of the organization. Frear (2007) defines onboarding as a “holistic approach combining people, process and technology to optimize the impact a new hire has on the organization with an emphasis on both effectiveness and efficiency” (p. 4).

A qualitative study is designed to explore a phenomenon. It is my hope that the information gathered in this study of onboarding experiences of student support professionals will inform and motivate those in higher education to be a part of a newcomer’s experience. We can each make a difference, whether it be through a smile, an invitation to a meeting or lunch, or even through time spent making introductions across campus. If onboarding was understood as a non-costly, grassroots, with very person striving to make a difference, the newcomer experience would be extremely improved, from day one to day 401.

“All knowledge is connected to all other knowledge. The fun is in making the connections.” –

Arthur C. Aufderheide

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Interview Guide

1. How were you introduced to your workplace and how was your workplace introduced to you?
2. What stands out to you as important to you as important information that was conveyed to you and how was it conveyed?
3. Describe an early significant moment or an insight you had about your job, your role, or the organization. How did that realization come about?
4. Can you identify something you wish you had known earlier and how you learned it when you did?
5. How were you introduced to the important offices with which you have interacted? How were the agreed-upon values and beliefs of your unit, communicated and how did you learn where is there disagreement?
6. How did you get connected within and apart from your office?
7. How was information communicated?
8. How did you learn who were the key people to know, and why?
9. How did you recognize or develop Where were your support systems?
10. How did you learn how decisions get made, and by whom?
11. How did you learn to recognize who were informal leaders?

Institutional Review Board Consent

STUDENT AFFAIRS PROFESSIONALS EXPERIENCE ONBOARDING

3

If you agree to participate in this project, please sign and date this signature page and return it to:

Stacy Frost
SMSU Foundation
1501 State Street
Marshall, MN 56258

Keep a copy of the informed consent for your records and reference.

Signature(s) for consent:

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you consent to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.

I give permission to join the research project entitled, "Student Affairs Professionals Experience Onboarding."

Please initial next to either "Yes" or "No" to the following:

___ Yes ___ No I consent to be audio-recorded for the interview portion of this research.

Participant's Name (Print)

Date

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Name

Date

St. Cloud State University
Institutional Review Board
Approval date: 9-26-19
Expiration date: 9-25-20

Appendix C: Informed Consent

Informed Consent for Participation in Research Student Support Professionals Experience Onboarding

You are invited to participate in a qualitative research study that focuses on the onboarding experience of Student Support Professionals. The research project is being conducted by Stacy Frost, a doctoral student in the School of Education at St. Cloud State University.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to answer questions specific to your onboarding experience. The purpose of the study is to gather empirical data to establish how Student Support professionals make sense of their onboarding experience. The interview will last for approximately one hour. However, if more time is needed, or additional interviews are required, they can be scheduled at your convenience. Your responses will be recorded on audiotape or other electronic means, that I may transcribe your responses accurately as possible for exact representation of our conversation. The participant, the researcher, and the researcher's advisor will be the only people to have privilege to these interviews. The only alternative for which the recording may be heard by anyone other than those listed is by written permission from you, the participant.

Your responses will be kept strictly confidential. At no point do you have to allow your real name or title to be revealed if you so choose. A fictitious name will be used in the document. Results will be presented in aggregate form with no more than 1-3 general descriptors presented together. During the interview, you may refuse to answer any questions. At any time, if you wish to withdrawal from this research project, you have the opportunity. This transcript, along with specific quotes from the transcript, may be used in a published research article or presentation.

Little or no potential risks are identified. The benefits could include personal growth for each participant through opportunities for reflection and dialogue about their experience.

I truly appreciate your participation in this project. I want you to be as comfortable as possible. Please feel free to talk to me about any concern you might have. My phone number is 507-829-7106.

This project has been submitted for guidance by the Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects (IRB) at St. Cloud State University.

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age, you have read the information provided above, and you have consent to participate. You may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty after signing this form.

Participant's Name

Date

Participant's Signature

Date

Researcher's Name

Date