EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION

EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

by

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(Under the Direction of Diane Cooper)

ABSTRACT

Using Hobfoll’s (1989) Conservation of Resources Theory, this phenomenological study examined the lived experience and outcomes of employees spending time in other offices within a division of student affairs and enrollment management. While a great deal of literature focuses on interventions to increase engagement in business, little attention has been paid to higher education, and in particular, non-academic employee engagement.

Within this study, twelve employees completed a conversational learning experience by spending four-hours in an office other than their own. Then, utilizing the results from Soane et al.’s (2012) Intellectual, Social, and Affective (ISA) Engagement Scale before the experience and after the experience, as well as graphic elicitation, a semi-structured interview was completed. This study provided evidence that when employees spend time with employees outside their immediate work environment they are likely to experience increased employee engagement and a willingness to collaborate across departmental lines. Three themes emerged when analyzing the data that answer this research question: What are the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience? These three themes were departmental comparison, career exploration, and the impact of others.
Employees who compared their department with other departments couched their comments within the context of student success. Participants both celebrated and judged their fellow employees based on the department’s efforts to support students. Overall, participants felt their understanding of the depth and breadth of divisional programming was expanded, and they also noted that they felt less alone. Nine of the twelve participants took part in the study with the hopes of possibly working in that field one day. Finally, all twelve participants mentioned the impact of others during their interview. Employees most noted the impact that faculty and senior administrators had on their own work.

As future interventions, this study suggests that managers develop opportunities for employees to explore facets outside their daily lives. This includes designing work processes that allow for employees to work directly with students rather than operating within a shared-services model. In addition, managers are encouraged to take intentional action towards increasing interaction between entry-level employees and senior-level leaders.

INDEX WORDS: employee engagement, conversational learning experience, career exploration, phenomenology, graphic elicitation, faculty and staff collaboration, organizational silos, cross-collaboration
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DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to any and all employees I have had the pleasure of working with in my career. Their patience with me, as a growing manager, has helped me become the leader that I am today. Through my own failures and successes, these individuals have shaped me, many without even knowing it. Through the years, they have often pushed me outside of my comfort-zone and challenged me to change for the better. Through that guidance, I have recognized the joy that comes from leading with a vulnerable, servant heart that is focused on the betterment of others. When my ambitions became the success of my employees, my heart became full.

In particular, I would like to dedicate this work to the employees, both student and professional, that I have the pleasure working alongside each day in Murphy Hall. Understanding their stories and realizing the joy I get in helping them succeed has been life-changing. It is only through watching them grow as a team that I became inspired to do this work to develop new approaches to bettering our work space. I am humbled by the growth of our office to a work-place of choice for so many. That accomplishment has only been possible through the employees, both current and past, that have worked there with me. It is the growth of our office as a team and the individual growth of its members that I will remember more than any other metric of success in my time at West Georgia. Go West Go Wolves!
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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

The American employment landscape has become increasingly volatile over the last several decades, with employee turnover in all industries becoming an expectation rather than an aberration (Jo, 2008). Within student affairs, departures of new professionals have been estimated to be as high as 50 to 60 percent within an employee’s first five years (Marshall, Gardner, Hughes, & Lowery, 2016; Tull, 2006). Findings on the causes of these departures have varied widely, but the narrative around employee departure has centered largely on ineffective supervision, low pay, lack of advancement opportunities, and long hours (Johnsrud & Rosser, 1999; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

The work of college admissions officers, for example, often starts before sunrise and encompasses responsibilities from lugging brochures to answering parents’ emails (Hoover, 2016). Hoover (2016) observed that “fate doesn’t deliver students to college campuses . . . enrolling all those tuition-paying customers takes work, often grueling and never glamorous” (para. 1). An increasing focus on the bottom line in higher education creates significant challenges in retaining employees, who are frequently expected to do more with less.

Higher education “is a business, and the business must be fed” (Hu, 2012, para. 18). However, as funds for compensation diminish, plummeting staff retention often results (Phair, 2014). Moreover, a profit-motivated reality for higher education contrasts starkly with the motivations and values of many student affairs professionals. In a survey of 100 student affairs professionals, nearly half of respondents identified the opportunity to effect positive change and
foster student learning and growth as the reasons they chose their profession (Brown, 2014). This concern is in addition to the significant challenges of transitioning from graduate work to full-time employment, a journey that often creates confusion and dissatisfaction due to role ambiguity, stress, job burnout, and work overload (Evans, 1988; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Rosser & Javinar, 2003; Tull, 2006).

Nonetheless, higher education’s focus on the bottom line is both an economic reality and an administrative necessity. Eighty-four percent of U.S. adults believe that some education after high school is necessary to get a good job (Kelly, 2015). Yet, since the 1980s states have steadily cut higher education expenditures, forcing institutions to raise tuition to compensate (Quinton, 2016). Legislatures across the country remain skeptical of the value provided by colleges and universities using state appropriations, and the proliferation of for-profit institutions has only eroded that trust further. For example, in a study of 1.4 million for-profit college graduation records and IRS data, the majority of students who left these institutions had worse earnings than before they enrolled (Columbus, 2016).

Additionally, the public has become increasingly alarmed by the dramatic increase in non-academic expenditures at not-for-profit higher education institutions nationwide. For example, from 1987 to 2012, an average of 87 administrative employees were added to U.S. colleges and universities every working day (Marcus, 2014). Moreover, the National Center for Education Statistics recently reported that of the 3.98 million employees in higher education, only 37 percent provide classroom instruction (Ginder, Kelly-Reid, & Mann, 2017).

These findings raise further questions about both tax dollar usage and overall academic quality (Marcus, 2014). If quality is the concern, educational outcomes do little to calm the public’s fears. The national graduation rate, for non-profit and for-profit institutions combined,
has remained constant over the past 15 years, with only 58 percent of college students graduating within six years; among non-flagship universities, the four-year graduation rate is only 19 percent (Complete College America, 2014; Undergraduate retention, 2017). At a time when the public is clamoring for increased accountability, the economic realities remain a challenge for higher education, further damaging both senior and entry-level administrator morale and retention.

The Importance of Student Affairs Staff Retention

Student affairs professionals provide resources and services that are vital to student success. For the purposes of this study, I will consider admissions staff a part of student affairs, as they play a key role in educating students and parents about the college selection process. For example, college choices based on a school’s popularity or national ranking have been shown to lead to low retention rates (Yanez, 2015). In contrast, factors such as location, academic offerings, and campus environment play a critical role in finding an institution that offers the right fit for a student’s needs, and researching such factors requires time, thoughtfulness, and support from admissions staff (O’Connell, 2010).

Admissions staff members, like all student affairs professionals, are critical partners in a student’s journey towards graduation. Admissions staff recognize “that each file represents a living, breathing person” (Hoover, 2016, para. 12), and it is at this individual level that college outcomes are so powerful. On average, those with a college degree earn 62.5% more than those with a high school diploma. Job satisfaction also increases, as college graduates are 43 percent more likely than high school graduates to describe themselves as very satisfied with their job (Caumont, 2014). Degree attainment also impacts future generations, as a parent’s educational attainment positively correlates with their children’s educational attainment (Trostel, 2015).
With both young and seasoned professionals constantly cycling out of the student affairs profession, however, educational attainment faces a potentially damaging decline (Trostel, 2015). If the best and brightest lose their motivation in the current environment, potential reformers, innovators, and creative thinkers exit the field due to burnout, limiting necessary interventions and innovations focused on retention and progression (Trostel). Moreover, from a purely financial perspective, turnover at the institutional level is also very costly, contrasting with the public’s demand for increased efficiency (Trostel). The search process for and training of new employees require significant resources, with estimates of direct costs as high as 12 percent of total university pre-tax income, in addition to the time-cost of training new staff (Allen, Bryant, & Vardaman, 2010). Additionally, the departure of new professionals represents a loss of talent for the field and a loss of the resources invested by both the graduate program and the hiring institution (Evans, 1988). Finally, the loss of access to an employee’s social network, professional experience, and institutional knowledge leads to a decline in total work quality, even after new employees are onboarded (Allen et al.).

Factors Affecting Student Affairs Employee Retention

With the public clamoring for increased degree attainment and the power of motivated and engaged student affairs employees central to student success, it is important to consider the elements often linked to increased employee retention.

Strong Interpersonal Relationships

Organizations depend on numerous acts of cooperation, altruism, and self-sacrifice to operate at peak levels (Katz, 1964). Work environments described as more caring and cooperative correlate with improved employee performance and greater job satisfaction (Austin, 1985). Staff members seek community and cooperation within their jobs and careers and rely on
inter-institutional networks or alliances between employees and units as incentives to fully embrace committing to their jobs. Positive relationships among colleagues and supervisors correlate with greater job commitment and engagement, as unit-level relationships play a major role in encouraging employees to emotionally connect with each other (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002).

An employee’s perceptions of the organization’s warmth and their colleagues’ support have shown to be strong predictors of task performance as well as reducers of negative stress, staving off disengagement and burnout (Goodman & Svyantek, 1999; Hagedorn, 1994). Organizational culture and interpersonal relationships, more than any external factors, impacted overall satisfaction, engagement, and intent to leave in several studies (Goodman & Svyantek; Harter et al., 2002; Ostroff & Rothausen, 1997; Rosser & Javinar, 2003). Kahn (1990) found that positive relationships result in “supportive and trusting interactions that promote dignity, self-appreciation, and sense of worthwhileness . . . invaluable source(s) of meaning in people’s lives” (pp. 707-708).

**Feeling Valued**

Feeling valued is a key part of feeling supported and trusted in the workplace. In a study of student affairs professionals who had left the field, Frank (2013) found that the most common reason for leaving was feeling unvalued as professionals by the university community. This reason was cited nearly four times as often as the next most frequent response. Respondents reported that they did not feel appreciated, believed others did not think they were good at their work, felt that their opinions were discounted, and wondered if what they were doing even mattered to their university (Frank).
In three separate studies (Frank, 2013; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1997; Marshall et al., 2016), this range of responses was given five times as often as complaints about work-life balance and four times as often as concerns regarding supervision. Midlevel student affairs administrators also ranked as one of their top three frustrations a lack of recognition of their contributions and competence (Johnsrud, Heck, & Rosser; 2000). Similarly, in the comparable industry of healthcare, nurses who felt valued and who reported having respectful relationships with doctors had both higher job satisfaction and lower intent to leave (Larrabee, Janney, Ostrow, Withrow, Hobbs, Jr., & Burant, 2003).

For student affairs administrators, negative perceptions of their working conditions, lack of trust in coworkers, and limited recognition of their competence directly correlated with intent to leave, even more than complaints about low pay (Austin, 1985; Frank, 2013). In contrast, positive feelings—such as believing that your work matters, that someone cares about you, that you are viewed as highly competent, and that inter-departmental support exists—creates a positive mood state that leads to beneficial acts on behalf of the organization, including increased work commitment (Anderson, Guido-DiBrito, & Morrell, 2000; Aquino, 1995; Austin; Hempfling, 2015; Hermsen, 2008; Johnsrud & Rosser, 1997; Rosser & Javinar, 2003).

Coworker relationships horizontally across an organization thus generate increased organizational cohesion and satisfaction, yielding greater job embeddedness and connection, and creating a network of trust that employees are often hesitant to sever (Mitchell, Holtom, Lee, Sablynski, & Erez, 2001). Overall, coworker dissatisfaction has been shown to be more influential than low pay in influencing employee turnover (Mitchell et al.). In trusting environments comprised of employees who value each other’s work, employees participate in
more knowledge sharing and are more creative, proactive, and adaptive (Burkard, Cole, Ott, & Stoflet, 2005).

Conversely, however, the desire for these positive elements may lead new professionals to compare themselves to their peers, often in an incomplete and misinformed way. Such comparisons may result in frustration and feelings of inadequacy, particularly when one feels isolated from one’s peers (Aquino, 1995; Renn & Hodges, 2007). With such a dramatic impact, intentional efforts to create trusting, collaborative networks have received attention across a handful of studies (Bender, 2009; Burkard et al., 2005; Hempfling; 2015; Renn & Hodges). For example, because of the need for heightened collaboration and group facilitation, scholars have begun to suggest that these skills become required professional competencies, particularly during the pre-employment, orientation, and transition phases for new professionals (Burkard et al.; Renn & Hodges).

To that end, Bender (2009) recommended utilizing temporary employee transfers within offices on campus to stimulate professional growth and increase staff cohesion. Of the population Bender studied, nearly 100 percent of student affairs staff believed their job was important, but fewer than half of them perceived that their work was considered important by the campus. Within this context, Bender called for intentional efforts to create a “complementary blend” (p. 564) between the institution and staff members across departments. Such intentionality, Bender believes, will strengthen the ties between employees and increase their sense of importance and value in their work.

**Employee Engagement**

Following the publication of *First, Break All the Rules: What the World’s Greatest Managers Do Differently* (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999) nearly two decades ago, employee
engagement, the study of employees’ psychological connection to their work through short engagement surveys, has continued as a focus within the business sector (Bakker & Leiter, 2010). Utilizing survey research to demonstrate that work engagement correlated positively with employee retention, profitability, productivity, and safety, as well as with customer satisfaction, the authors quickly pushed forward employee engagement as a managerial focus (Buckingham & Coffman).

Since the book’s publication, managers have become increasingly attentive to the experiences that shape their employees’ work environments (Kumar & Pansari, 2015). High-performing companies including Whole Foods Markets, Starbucks, Marriott International, and Southwest Airlines have all outperformed their competition by relying on the power of employee engagement (Kumar & Pansari). As organizational success comes to rely ever more heavily on employees, employers increasingly recognize employees as the only source of sustainable competitive advantage in increasing their bottom line (Cooper-Hakim & Viswesvaran, 2005).

The positive impact of employee engagement is significant. Gallup’s (2013) most recent report on the state of the American workplace reviewed 192 organizations in 49 industries, encompassing a total of 1.4 million employees. In comparing the top and bottom quartiles of engagement scores, companies in the top quartile had 65 percent less turnover, 49 percent fewer safety incidents, and 41 percent fewer product defects than companies in the bottom quartile (Gallup). In addition, the highly-engaged companies had 10% higher customer ratings, reported 21% greater productivity, and were 22% more profitable than the companies with the lowest engagement (Gallup).

These results echo other research studies’ findings that heightened employee engagement positively impacts customer satisfaction and loyalty, profitability, productivity, and safety.
(Baldoni, 2013; Harter et al., 2002; Kumar & Pansari, 2015). As an example, for organizations that had 9.3 actively engaged employees for every one actively disengaged employee, earnings per share were 147 percent higher compared to companies whose workforce was comprised of equal numbers of engaged and disengaged employees (Gallup, 2013). Moreover, employees who reported high levels of engagement also had increased commitment levels, greater loyalty, and heightened job satisfaction, and were the least likely to leave their organization (Ghosh, Satyawadi, Prasad Joshi, & Shadman, 2013; Harter et al.).

One Lived Experience

In the Fall of 2015, one of my employees chose to spend the day in the university’s Center for Academic Success (CAS), a resource focused on academic support and intervention. Through his work in my office, he processes approximately 200 admission decision appeals submitted annually, and he grew troubled that so few of these students were finding success once they enrolled. Troubled by the retention and progression challenges these appeal students faced, he decided he wanted to learn what support services exist to help students who are struggling academically.

During his four-hour visit to CAS, he developed an appreciation for the difficulty of their work and the demands on the staff. He conversed with staff members and gathered information on what they do and how they help students. When he returned to our office, he praised their work and shared with others the challenges they face. As a result of his experience, he was emboldened to explore collaboration. He started a partnership that required appeal students to commit to an academic support plan as a condition of their acceptance. A year later, his collaboration was rewarded. In the first semester of implementing this requirement, Fall 2016, appeal students achieved an average GPA that was higher than that of non-appeal students, and
among those who completed their academic support plan, their results were even higher.

Moreover, as a result of this experience my employee became more engaged in his work. He felt more valued, energetic, and enthusiastic. His positive perception of the work in CAS prompted his interest in collaboration and inspired him to achieve his goals.

My employee’s experience mirrors my own. I have always believed that distrust and attributional error work covertly to limit organizational progress and results, particularly in higher education. In this complex milieu, relationships drive institutional actors. Establishing strong interpersonal relationships and feeling valued are particularly important to non-academic staff members, who often seek to understand their place on campus. Several studies point to the role of personal relationships in shaping employee satisfaction and engagement (Bender, 2009; Hempfing; 2015; Renn & Hodges, 2007). These works argue that employee engagement, and ultimately increased performance, rely on an employee’s social-organizational context. Thus intentional efforts to foster meaningful interaction among employees can increase employee engagement.

Connecting with the community in my division, across offices, has changed me. As a result, I believe one way to increase employee engagement, and consequently retention, is by providing programs that encourage social interaction and challenge employees to understand each other’s motives and expectations (Bender). One such program, modeled after my employee’s experience and designed to increase social interaction and enhance employee engagement and performance, is a conversational learning program for non-academic staff members on a college campus (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Conversational learning encourages learning through direct conversation, valuing emotional, sensual, and physical engagement in the process (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb). Through this program, detailed in Chapter 3,
employees will have the opportunity to visit other offices and spend time observing and engaging in conversations with employees with whom they do not spend time on a daily basis.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic higher education staff members completing a conversational learning experience. Establishing strong interpersonal connections with peers and feeling valued as a coworker are key drivers of employee performance, engagement, and retention. Thus, it is critical for institutions to make intentional efforts to foster such connections and instill a sense of value.

This study seeks to contribute to the existing literature on higher education employment and work engagement by creating a conversational learning program and observing the experience and its outcomes for participating higher education staff members. Soane et al. (2012) noted that employee engagement encompasses a social component, and by focusing on social interaction among non-academic staff members in a Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, this study provides insight into both the working experience and employee engagement of non-academic staff members.

**Research Question**

In this study, I will investigate the following research question: What are the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience?

**Conclusion**

Employee engagement has been shown to significantly benefit the bottom line, decrease attrition, and increase employee satisfaction for organizations across the world (Gallup, 2013). In
higher education, a sector that struggles with student affairs employee retention, intentional efforts to increase social interaction and enhance understanding among employees are critical to reversing existing retention challenges. Limited research has examined the engagement of non-academic higher education employees, and even fewer studies have explored the impact on engagement of social connections between non-academic staff members on a college campus.

This study seeks to capture the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience, including the impact on an employee’s Intellectual, Social, Affective (ISA) Scale engagement score (Soane et al., 2012). This scale measures employee engagement by utilizing the more typical questions, but introduces a social component to the typical measurement of engagement.

1. I focus hard on my work.
2. I concentrate on my work.
3. I pay a lot of attention to my work.
4. I share the same work values as my colleagues.
5. I share the same work goals as my colleagues.
6. I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues.
7. I feel positive about my work.
8. I feel energetic in my work.
9. I am enthusiastic in my work.

The study will rely on semi-structured, phenomenological interviews informed by both the participants’ responses on the ISA Scale’s nine questions before and after the conversational learning experience and the use of graphic elicitation to increase participant reflection. The semi-structured interview, which is described in detail in Chapter Three, will encourage participants to
reflect on their experience of participating in the conversational learning program. Using each of these data pieces, I will seek to answer the research question and understand the lived experience and outcomes of participating in a conversational learning program.

To guide this research, I used Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resources theory. Hobfoll’s theory, also discussed in Chapter Three, defines all employee interactions as governed by the human tendency to retain, protect, and build resources. Hobfoll’s theory fits perfectly into an analysis of the workplace as a social setting, as the framework helps to identify the workplace as an environment filled with constant exchanges, both overt and covert. Using the “exchange lens” to view employee interaction illuminates why, in the absence of intentional interventions, employees may naturally behave in ways that hinder performance and decrease the exchange of resources. Cumulatively, this study seeks to help managers in higher education recognize the value and power of implementing intentional practices that foster social connections and trust among coworkers, elucidate shared goals and values, and increase the productive exchange of physical and social resources.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on employee engagement has its roots in the work of Hackman and Oldham (1980) and Kahn (1990), whose psychological studies represented the first academic approaches to investigating the relationship of engagement with employee satisfaction and co-worker relationships. Hackman and Oldham’s Job Characteristics Model focused on task design as a driver of employee motivation and suggested that boring or monotonous jobs stifled performance. Jobs that contain variety, autonomy, and challenge, in contrast, improve employee performance. Hackman and Oldham advocated increasing productivity by redesigning jobs with a focus on developing opportunities for employees to complete whole pieces of work, take responsibility for the outcomes of their work, and achieve actual, tangible results.

Kahn’s (1990) foundational work collected data from camp counselors and architects. His study identified subconscious questions that employees ask themselves to determine whether they have the resources to fulfill an obligation, ultimately affecting their performance. These subconscious questions include: How meaningful is the task to me? Is the task worthwhile and valued? How safe will I be in completing the task? and, How available am I? This last question references the availability of energy and the capacity to provide the necessary physical, intellectual, and emotional effort (Kahn). These questions, identified by Kahn more than 25 years ago, continue to provide the foundation for current scholarship on employee engagement, as management continues to seek ways to harness employees’ full capacity to solve problems, connect with people, and develop innovative services (Bakker & Leiter, 2010).
Types of Work Engagement

Scholars define employee engagement in multiple ways. One common approach measures engagement based on personality traits, evaluating the degree to which employees, in their work environment, are enthusiastic, inspired, passionate, and empowered (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015; De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Other definitions focus on employees’ commitment, encompassing their belief in the mission, purpose, and values of the organization and how they demonstrate that commitment through their actions (Sahoo & Mishra, 2012). Baldoni (2013) described an engaged employee as someone who “wants to come to work, understands their job, and knows how their work contributes to the success of the organization” (para. 3). Finally, other researchers have defined engagement as an affective-motivational state that leads to increased performance and motivation through the channeling of personal energies into physical, cognitive, and emotional labor (Bakker & Leiter, 2010; Schaufeli et al., 2001). Successful engagement is the “illusive force” that creates a “coveted energy” among these motivated employees (Wellins & Concelman, 2005, p. 1).

Given the vast array of approaches to employee engagement, Macey and Schneider (2008) created a framework to organize the discourse around this hard-to-define concept into three distinct forms of engagement: state, behavioral, and trait and dispositional engagement. State engagement is reminiscent of Hackman and Oldham’s (1980) research. Within this approach, engagement shifts daily based on an employee’s job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, organizational commitment, job involvement, and satisfaction with one’s company, manager, or work group (Macey & Schneider). For example, early work on the Gallup Workplace Survey referred to engagement as “satisfaction-engagement” (Harter et al., 2002, p. 269), emphasizing short-term satisfaction with working conditions rather than employee feelings.
developed over time, such as passion, commitment, and enthusiasm (Macey & Schneider).
Within a more contemporary human resources paradigm, these longer-term feelings that lead to
task and organizational commitment have become increasingly important, as managers shift their
focus from treating everyone the same to customizing work roles based on employee strengths,
needs, and preferences (Testimony, 2005). This shift in focus is designed to create more engaged
workers who enjoy their work and commit to tasks at which they excel.

The macro-level counterpart to task commitment is organizational commitment, a
dedication to one’s work and the experience of a sense of significance in carrying out that work
(De Braine & Roodt, 2011). Societal norms, the workplace environment, and perceptions of
one’s fit within an organization help form an employee’s work-based identity and self-image and
influence the manner in which employees demonstrate their commitment to an organization’s
mission, purpose, and values (Sahoo & Mishra, 2012). Organizational commitment, however,
requires a two-way commitment for optimal employee satisfaction and work engagement. The
commitment must come from the organization and the employee, through intentional and
proactive effort, to provide the best fit of human and institutional resources insuring intended
outcomes and achievements (Bender, 2009).

Wojdylo, Baumann, Fischbach, and Engeser (2014) identified “work-craving employees”
as extreme examples of organizational commitment. These employees base their entire self-
worth and identity on their success at work, a total, though unbalanced, approach to
organizational commitment (Wojdylo et al.). In more moderate circumstances, when employees
have the resources they need to do their jobs—including strong teamwork, effective supervision,
and career mobility—the lines between self and work are blurred, strengthening organizational
commitment. With heightened organizational commitment and an opportunity to do the kind of
work that one does best, employees feel empowered, experience self-efficacy and control, and ultimately believe they can have an impact and make a difference through their actions (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Sahoo & Mishra, 2012; Spreitzer, 1995).

Macey and Schneider’s (2008) second form of engagement, *behavioral engagement*, is directly observable, unlike state engagement. Behavioral engagement entails putting in extra effort or performing what Brown and Leigh (1996) described as “special, extra, or, at least, atypical work” (Macey & Schneider, p. 14). While managers may find this type of engagement easiest to measure based on work products, academic measurement of this extra effort has often been ill-defined and elusive. In response, researchers have sought to measure effort using indicators focused on commitment and time on task, as well as supervisory ratings that designate employees as both task proficient and driven (Brown & Leigh; Van Scotter & Motowidlo, 1996).

In addition, narrative comments have been helpful in evaluating employee motivation, expanding the measurement of behavior beyond doing more to doing something differently, or working smarter rather than harder. Examples include instituting innovative practices, creating new initiatives, and seeking out new opportunities (Brown & Leigh, 1996; Kahn, 1990). Additionally, Macey and Schneider (2008) discussed *role expansion*, in which employees exercise autonomy in taking on a wider range of tasks than usual. This behavior may take many forms, including exhibiting self-starter tendencies, adaptability, proactivity, and persistence.

Beyond simply doing more and doing it more innovatively, LePine, Erez, and Johnson (2002) identified Organizational Citizenship Behavior (OCB) as an additional dimension of behavioral engagement. OCB is defined as activities that support “the social and psychological context in which an organization’s employee are embedded” (LePine et al., p. 53). Examples of behavior within a high OCB environment include volunteering, helping, and enthusiastically
endorsing institutional objectives. Motowidlo (2000) defined OCB as the “behaviors managers want their subordinates to perform but cannot require them to perform” (p. 116).

The third form of engagement, *trait and dispositional engagement*, relies on the personal attributes of the employee (Macey & Schneider, 2008). One of these personal attributes is positive affect, or the extent to which individuals experience positive moods (Macey & Schneider). Positive affect impacts the way employees understand and conceptualize organizational experiences, in turn influencing how they behave under a given set of circumstances (Macey & Schneider). Employees with positive affect maintain a consistently positive state, characterized by dedication, vigor, attentiveness, pride, absorption, and proactivity (Macey & Schneider). Proactivity is particularly important, as it describes one’s personal initiative, self-efficacy, and conscientiousness, the need for achievement and commitment to work (Crant, 2000; Roberts, Chernyshenko, Stark, & Goldberg, 2005). Though elements such as conscientiousness can be inhibitive at times, sometimes leading employees to exhibit excessive cautiousness, conscientious employees are described as hard working and highly desirable in most work environments (Roberts et al.). The final personal attribute Macey and Schneider identify as contributing to engagement is the autotelic personality. Employees with this trait engage in activities for their own sake, independent of any expected rewards. Individuals with an autotelic personality are more likely to take on challenges, persist, and engage simply for the love of their job.

Each of these personal attributes influences employees’ experience by enabling them to make a positive, energetic effort to do what is necessary to achieve optimal organizational outcomes (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Engaged employees exhibit a high level of energy and resilience even in the face of challenges (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001; Schaufeli &
Bakker, 2010). Their dedication, sense of significance, and pride lead them to demonstrate enthusiasm for their work and to experience absorption, a state in which individuals are engrossed in their work and time passes quickly (Maslach et al.; Schaufeli & Bakker).

**Employee Burnout**

Employee engagement has an exact opposite: employee burnout (Maslach et al., 2001). Maslach et al. (2001) identified the three dimensions of employee burnout as exhaustion, cynicism about one’s job, and a sense of ineffectiveness or lack of accomplishment. The Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) is an instrument designed to measure these dimensions (Maslach et al.).

Exhaustion is most often the first symptom of burnout and a call to action for managers, as employees work long hours and begin to feel overwhelmed and underappreciated (Goehring, Gallacchi, Kunzur, & Bovier, 2005). Once employees feel exhausted, as a coping mechanism, they often depersonalize and distance themselves emotionally and cognitively from their work (Maslach et al., 2001). Depersonalizing a situation makes it easier to become cynical and treat others as abstract objects. From this distance, employees feel comfortable exhibiting cynicism and indifference towards their customers (Kim & Stoner, 2008).

With both cynicism and indifference permeating an employee’s work, it is easier to feel overwhelmed and distant, making the sense of ineffectiveness ever-present (Maslach et al., 2001). Burnout changes employees’ perception of their work, such that “what started out as important, meaningful, and challenging work becomes unpleasant, unfulfilling, and meaningless” (Maslach et al., p. 416). This shift directly influences employee attrition in higher
education. In a recent study of student affairs employees who left the field, 70 percent of survey respondents cited extreme workloads and excessive fatigue as factors in their departure (Marshall et al., 2016).

Ultimately, engagement serves as the natural adversary to burnout. Accompanying elements, such as a sense of significance and pride, lead to absorption in and enthusiasm for one’s work, directly counteracting feelings of burnout (Maslach et al., 2001; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010). When employees are engrossed, they exhibit vigor and resilience, even in the face of daily challenges.

**Employee Engagement Models**

Several formal models have been developed to guide understanding of the diverse and complex field of work performance and engagement. One of the earliest models, Karasek’s (1979) Demand Control Model, represents the first effort to evaluate environmental impacts on employee performance. Karasek suggested that optimal work conditions occur when employees can balance the demands of their job and exert control over the tasks they perform daily. Within the Demand Control Model, management focuses on establishing equilibrium between an employee’s work responsibilities and their available resources, including less tangible resources such as control over work product (Karasek).

When employees possess increased autonomy and control, they are better able to convert stress energy into the energy to act. Highlighting a similar correlation, Siegrist (1996) introduced the Effort-Reward Imbalance (ERI) model of workplace management and engagement. This model suggests that job strain results from the gap between effort and reward. The definition of *reward* is broad, encompassing salary, security, career opportunities, social support from
colleagues, and supervisory support and feedback, and giving management the opportunity to address these gaps to increase engagement (Siegrist).

Most recently, Bakker and Demerouti (2007) developed the Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) model, a more universally relatable model applicable to all types of employment. Demands are defined broadly to include physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the job that require sustained physical, cognitive, or emotional effort. Examples of workplace demands include high work pressure, a debilitating physical environment, or emotionally demanding interactions with clients.

Job resources likewise span a broad continuum of physical, psychological, social, and organizational aspects of the job (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Resources, in this model, are essential for achieving work goals, reducing job demands and associated psychological costs, and stimulating personal and professional growth and development (Bakker & Demerouti). Rewards exist broadly. At the organizational level, career advancement and job security are impactful. At the interpersonal level, positive relationships with one’s supervisor and co-workers are critical resources. At the task level, task significance, variety, and autonomy serve as vital job resources (Bakker & Demerouti).

Though JD-R addresses job resources previously discussed by Hackman and Oldham (1980), the broad applicability of this model to varied tasks makes this work critical. JD-R suggests that there are larger psychological processes at work in the creation of job strain as well as motivation (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). For example, poorly designed jobs and work overload increase job demands, exhaust employees, and lead to performance protection strategies that include the narrowing of attention, task selectivity, and exhaustion. At the same time, in the inverse, these job demands can also serve as job resources, potential growth opportunities that
create increased challenge and force employees to stretch and grow professionally (Bakker & Demerouti).

In addition to its emphasis on job demands and resources, Bakker and Demerouti’s (2007) JD-R also incorporates a motivational component, as job resources motivate employees. By increasing work engagement and decreasing cynicism, they play an intrinsic motivational role that fosters employee growth, learning, and development, fulfilling a need for autonomy and creating a sense of competence. As Bakker and Demerouti note, “proper feedback fosters learning, thereby increasing job competence, whereas decision latitude and social support satisfy the need for autonomy and the need to belong, respectively” (p. 314). Moreover, environments that offer ample trust as a resource generate an increased willingness to dedicate one’s efforts and abilities to the organization and encourage productive risk-taking, making employees less susceptible to the impacts of resource loss.

Adding to Bakker and Demerouti’s (2007) JD-R, recent work includes efforts to address resource accumulation, the innate human desire to focus on self-preservation and conserve resources (Hobfoll, 2011). This intrinsic desire means resources tend to travel together in “caravans” and generate synergies or gain-spirals (Bakker & Demerouti). When employees accumulate resources, they are more willing to take risks and feel less threatened by challenges, leading to even greater resource accumulation. However, the inverse is also true, as those with fewer resources often feel threatened and operate in a more protective state, limiting gains (Baker & Demerouti). Hobfoll emphasized the need for management to work with, rather than against, this tendency. He suggested creating a shared resource pool, termed “resource-engaging ecologies” (p. 118), to facilitate the organizational usage of resources with an eye towards institutional goals and mission.
Finally, in a nod to trait and dispositional engagement, De Braine and Roodt (2011) assessed employees’ personal attributes as mitigating factors in resource conservation. De Braine and Roodt identified dedication, vigor, a propensity for absorption, and the development of a strong work-related self-identity as attributes that constitute additional resources by serving as buffers against job demands within the JD-R.

**The Measurement of Engagement**

A wide variety of instruments exists to assess the numerous and varying conceptions of engagement. The most common corporate engagement resource is the Gallup Q12 (Gallup, 2013). The Q12 is designed specifically to measure employee engagement with an eye towards impacting worker productivity, customer loyalty, and sales growth (Wagner & Harter, 2006). The Q12 consists of 12 questions that measure an employee’s job resources, from perceived importance and job fit in the workplace to social connections, scored on a Likert Scale (Appendix A). This approach to measuring worker engagement emphasizes an assessment of job resources, as described in the JD-R model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010).

Other measurement tools focus on the elements that influence employee burnout, the inverse of workplace engagement. Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, and Bakker (2001) developed a three-dimensional, 17-question instrument designed to measure vigor, dedication, and absorption, and conversely to measure the antecedents of burnout (Appendix B). Along with questions that assess employee engagement, Schaufeli et al. also developed a version targeted to students, in which the words *job* and *work* were replaced with *studies* and *class*, respectively. A third measurement, the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), scores the principal
components of engagement—vigor, dedication, and absorption—on a seven-point rating scale (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003; Appendix C).

A fourth, more recent approach utilizes the domains of intellectual, affective, and social engagement, or ISA (Appendix D), to develop a cumulative understanding of employee engagement (Soane et al., 2012). This scale introduces a measure of the extent to which employees are socially connected in their work environment and the degree to which they share common values with their colleagues (Soane et al.). While newer than its counterparts, ISA more closely represents Kahn’s (1990) original assertion that there is a strong social component to engagement. ISA has been shown to be statistically correlated with engagement scores on both the Q12 and UWES (Soane et al.).

**Managerial Impact on Engagement**

Managers have a significant impact on employee engagement, controlling variables in the work environment such as employees’ ability to be their preferred self, employee autonomy, and task challenge and variety (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Management also controls a wide range of social conditions, including access to meaningful work, decision-making authority, opportunities for personal growth, opportunities to learn or update emerging skills, and feelings of competence (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015). Managers can impact the work environment and employee experience by increasing job satisfaction, psychological empowerment, organizational commitment, job involvement, and satisfaction with one’s company, manager, or work group (Macey & Schneider). Alternatively, managers can foster the conditions that lead to burnout and active disengagement.

In a study of 61 naval cadets via a diary questionnaire, Breevaart et al. (2014) found that leaders could shape their followers’ work environment by helping them change the workplace in
beneficial ways, including providing them with autonomy and social support. In a study of daily life at a steel mill in India, researchers found that engagement, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, low intention to quit, and organizational citizenship behavior increased when career development, empowerment, workplace image, and equal opportunity were prioritized (Sahoo & Mishra, 2012). Leaders must engender a strong sense of purpose in work, offer greater rewards—such as higher compensation and better managerial support—and ultimately, create value for the employee to have the best chance of achieving organizational goals (Maslach et al., 2001).

Trust between employees and management is also critical (Macey & Schneider, 2008). With trust in management, employees are confident that they will be rewarded for their time and energy. In contrast, in an environment lacking trust, employees are reluctant to outperform each other for fear of retaliation or more work. Talented managers create trust and engagement by eliminating ambiguity, encouraging honesty, creating transparency, exhibiting genuine caring, and demonstrating a willingness to listen (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014).

As just one example of a proactive managerial technique, high-performing leaders often enact formal internal communication plans that include a strong commitment to honesty, transparency, communicating the mission and goals of the organization, and face-to-face storytelling (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra, 2014). Employee engagement is further strengthened when senior management has a formal commitment to pursuing intentional dialogue with employees and takes the time to listen to employees’ concerns (Mishra, Boynton, & Mishra). Once employees understand whom they work for and how they fit in, they will develop trust, a sense of belonging, and a commitment to the organization.
Research studies help bring these premises to life. For example, a case study of highly engaged workers at a steel mill correlated employee engagement with a focus on aligning goals and values, offering quality onboarding, creating a culture of trust, providing participative leadership opportunities, offering continuous training to increase autonomy, and eliminating ambiguity (Sahoo & Mishra, 2012). Overall, the mill in the case study focused on managing people and deploying participatory strategies, emphasizing a connection to work via familial values and trust, social interaction between employees and management, and autonomy through the ownership of accounts. These practices stand in stark contrast to case studies of companies exhibiting hard management, which focus on competitive advantage and increased employee effort. In this approach employees had limited autonomy and no social unity, leaving the workforce so divided that they even wore different outfits depending on their work tasks (Jenkins & Delbridge).

**Employee Engagement in Higher Education**

The study of workplace engagement has received attention on many fronts within the business sector. In contrast, its application in higher education remains limited. In most cases, existing research has addressed only faculty engagement, a choice that appears to result from mere convenience rather than an area of interest (Bell, Rajendran, & Theiler, 2012; Boyd, 2011). Where faculty members were studied intentionally, the results were largely the same as those from corporate America. Faculty members were found to be more engaged in their work when given autonomy, social support, and performance feedback, all common tenets of corporate workplace engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2015; De Braine & Roodt, 2011; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Sahoo & Mishra, 2012).
Similarly, findings on the dynamics of burnout and work engagement among academics echoed those in the business sector, as did findings regarding decreasing workload, increasing job resources, and encouraging task variety and learning opportunities (Alzyoud, Othman, & Mohd Isa, 2015; Barhuizen, Rothmann, & Vijver, 2014). A recent engagement survey of faculty members found that 34 percent of faculty were engaged in their work, 52 percent were not engaged, and 14 percent were actively disengaged (Flaherty, 2015).

Compared to workers in other industries, faculty are more engaged than those in manufacturing and construction, retail, transportation, law or public policy, and architecture; they are equally engaged as workers in the computer and information systems industry (Flaherty, 2015). However, faculty are less engaged than those working in the arts, design, entertainment, sports, media, and healthcare. Interestingly, K-12 education employees enjoy a slightly higher level of engagement, 39 percent, than higher education faculty (Flaherty).

In general, faculty agree that their colleagues are committed to doing quality work, that they have opportunities to learn and grow, that someone at work cares about them, and that they have a best friend at work (Flaherty, 2015; Hagedorn & Forlaw, 2007). However, faculty endorsement was low for the following items: Have you talked with someone about your progress in the last six months? Have you received recognition for good work? Do you feel encouraged in your development? (Flaherty; Hagedorn & Forlaw).

Overall, the strongest predictor of engagement among surveyed faculty was agreeing that their opinion counts in their department, followed by perceiving that their views count at their institution. However, only 17 percent of respondents strongly agreed with the latter statement (Flaherty, 2015). Unsurprisingly, full-time faculty members were more engaged than part-time faculty. The highest engagement was exhibited by faculty at private institutions, particularly
those with small student bodies. Interestingly, and perhaps counterintuitively, only 32 percent of
tenured faculty were engaged compared to 45 percent of tenure track, non-tenured faculty.
Flaherty suggested that once professors receive tenure, “their colleagues may no longer view
development of their job and career as an area needing attention” (p. 10).

The individuality and independence of faculty members were common themes
throughout engagement surveys focused on this population. Of the eight faculty members
interviewed by Ferrer and McWilliams (2006), seven reported that they were not engaged in the
institution but were engaged with their department and students. Faculty are often intensely
autonomous and wary of organizational control, as exhibited by one faculty member’s response:

In a university, often it doesn’t matter how hard you work because we are all like feral
cats in the dark in our little offices and no one knows what anyone else is doing . . . you
make your own degree of involvement in a way as an academic; you work hard
recognizing that there might not be extrinsic rewards coming your way, it is just
something that you feel motivated to do yourself . . . you make yourself in a public sector
organization. (Ferrer & McWilliams, p. 11)

Faculty members are most engaged when they believe they have a voice, an antecedent of
faculty autonomy (Boyd, 2011; Ferrer & McWilliams, 2006). Rather than conceiving of
engagement as a universal construct, academic faculty engagement centers on individuality
(Boyd). In response to a question about whether feeling valued and being actively involved in the
university community drives faculty engagement, one faculty member responded:

All of this is all about perception. You might get the person next door to me who says,
great organization, fantastic, has all these supports in place because those support systems
service their needs at this time, and they don’t service my requirements at this time.

(Ferrer & McWilliams, p. 11)

Given faculty members’ need for autonomy and a voice in decision-making, institutions seeking high levels of employee engagement among faculty need to create rigorous processes to protect faculty autonomy, create an open climate for communication, and encourage consultation with faculty on changes in the workplace (Boyd).

However, faculty members are not all the same, and engagement can look entirely different, for example, among faculty at elite versus non-elite universities. Faculty at non-elite schools present a more conventional relationship with engagement, as autonomy, task identity, and performance feedback all increase the likelihood of faculty retention (Ferrer & Morris, 2013). This is not the case for faculty at elite universities, for whom no correlation has been established between work engagement, perceived organizational support, and intention to quit. Differing climates, job responsibilities, and fundamental attitudes about education across different types of institutions signal that when it comes to faculty and engagement, “there may not be a one size fits all approach” (Ferrer & Morris, p. 353).

Though equally important in the higher education landscape, the study of non-academic staff in higher education has received little attention. In the limited scholarship that exists, few differences from the business sector have emerged. Staff members experience lower turnover and exhibit heightened work engagement and job embeddedness when there is an increase in personal and professional connections across the organization, as well as enhanced person-job fit (Takawira, Coetzee, & Schreuder, 2014). Examples of these personal and professional connections include setting goals, coaching employees, and developing career plans. In addition,
job security, interpersonal relationships, teamwork, and the immediate work environment further influence workplace engagement (Volkwein & Zhou, 2003).

In general, strong supervision affects overall productivity, and daily goal setting increases both employee efficiency and output (Wilk & Redmon, 1997). Broadly, higher education employees are driven disproportionately by the need for professional and career development; strong interpersonal relationships; and recognition of their skills, competence, and expertise (Rosser, 2004). Moreover, an employee’s connection to the mission and goals of the institution strongly impacts retention and satisfaction (Rosser). This reality runs counter to the rampant increase in higher education capitalism, a drive for revenue generation and program commodification, over the past few decades. Particularly among early-career professionals, who typically feel a tension between what they learned in the classroom and their real-world practice, active disengagement and dissatisfaction are common (Lee & Helm, 2013).

**Breaking Silos: The Benefits of Trust and Organizational Citizenship Behavior**

Individual and organizational trust are critical components for producing high levels of employee engagement. Trust and employee engagement have been shown to have a direct positive relationship: As employee engagement rises, so, too, do employee perceptions of organizational and fellow-employee trustworthiness (Ugwu, Onyishi, & Rodriguez-Sanchez, 2013). When employees trust their supervisor and feel empowered to impact job outcomes, the result is increasingly productive job behaviors, including work engagement (Ugwu et al.).

Despite the benefits of heightened trust, higher education institutions naturally operate within a series of organizational structures, multiple divisions and offices with isolated reporting structures and job duties, that are not inclined to increase trust and collaboration. As a result of this organizational structure, barriers and gaps exist that may negatively impact student
development and disrupt the establishment of strong working relationships between divisions (O’Connor, 2012). These conditions are highly inefficient. For example, among academic colleges within a single university, each college has its own agenda requiring systems and service arrangements that are unique and therefore highly inefficient (Kolowich, 2010).

Despite higher education’s historical inclinations toward such divisiveness, intentional efforts to increase collaboration have yielded positive results in the form of increased trust, institutional commitment, and peer support (Eisenberger, Fasolo, & Davis-LaMastro, 1990; Katz, 1964; Tamer & Dereli, 2014). For example, American University intentionally developed a collection of faculty resources from various disciplines intended to encourage collaboration in solving the world’s problems (Tamer & Dereli). Additionally, American University developed an electronic annual reporting system that allows faculty to see the work being done by others across campus and created formal speed networking events that match scholars in the university who study similar topics, offering a free lunch for faculty who find a match (Kolowich, 2010).

The collaboration that results from such programming efforts naturally fosters trust among colleagues. Trust develops from the everyday routines, exchanges, and discussions of the working world, and rises and falls based on the day-to-day interactions within organizations and the flow of small commitments that are made and fulfilled (Stevens, MacDuffie, & Helper, 2015). Organizations are “incredibly complex, pluralistic, and divided into interests, sub-units, and subcultures” (Ring & Van De Ven, 1992, p. 487). The varying priorities and expectations within organizations make organizational dynamics and measurements of trust complex, as, after all, “it is individuals as members of organizations, rather than the organizations themselves, who trust” (Zaheer, McEvily, & Perronne, 1998, p. 143).
Simply put, trust exists at the intra-organizational level when one member of an organization holds positive expectations towards another organizational component and its members (Schoorman, Mayer, & Davis, 2007). However, in systems with strong controls in place, trust can be inhibited because there are fewer situations in which risk and perceived trustworthy actions are possible. With fewer opportunities to exhibit benevolence, individuals see actions not from a personal perspective, but as merely a reaction to the control system.

As one solution, organizations should consider intentionally creating *boundary spanners*, individuals who are able to move among the functional silos to encourage cooperative problem solving and community-based learning (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin Gyurmek, 1994). As one example, the development of enrollment management models in higher education has allowed employees to consistently span the boundaries between the various units that recruit and retain students, generating increased efficiency and highlighting shared purpose (Noel-Levitz, 2013). Essential to all boundary spanning, however, is the collaboration of upper administration across divisions, as collaboration at both the lower and upper administrative levels lessen silos.

Trust is invaluable, as it directly impacts intra-organizational exchange, acts as a competitive advantage, and decreases opportunistic behavior, reducing the transaction costs of doing business (Ring & Van De Ven, 1992). Trust creates a level of intimacy that strengthens meaningful cooperation, allowing institutions “to get beyond the marginal and project-oriented activities that make good public relations stories but are unlikely to have a lasting impact on members” (Gulati, 1995, p. 87). Overall, trust increases opportunities for innovation as members rely on both a mature partnership and its antecedent, a supportive environment (Eddy, 2010). In the long term, the role of individual representatives acting on behalf of their organization has been shown to directly influence inter-organizational trust, creating a stable context from which
organizational trust can develop further (Zaheer et al., 1998). Though individuals may come and go, inter-organizational relationships have lasting effects that institutionalize processes and codify informal behaviors to create and internalize trust (Zucker, 1977).

When employees trust and feel positive about one another, social behavior, knowledge sharing, and peer support are incentivized (Allen & Meyer, 1990). Through the social support of peers, employees fulfill their need for esteem, approval, and affiliation, leading to a satisfying work experience and emotional attachment. For example, in a study of K-12 schools, a high level of trust between teachers and administrators led to high levels of collaboration, and collaboration led to a willingness to share authority as well as greater confidence in the benevolence, reliability, and competence of others (Tschannen-Moran, 2000).

Collaboration, in this instance, created social capital that ultimately facilitated problem-solving at an organizational level. Perceived organizational and peer support allows employees to incorporate organizational membership into self-identification, fostering emotional bonds with and a feeling of responsibility to the organization, and generating stronger organizational commitment (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011). That commitment is further enhanced when employees perceive high levels of support and trust that greater effort will produce material rewards, as well as social rewards including approval, recognition, and the valuing of suggestions for improving the organization (Katz, 1964). This affective attachment enhances performance as employees see the organization’s gains and losses as their own, further increasing organizational commitment (Eisenberger et al., 1990).

At a micro-level, employees exhibit two types of trust: dispositional and relational. *Dispositional trust* is an individual trait that reflects one’s ingrained expectations and trust of others. *Relational trust* emerges from experiences and interactions with personal and business
partners, and is measured by both confidence and predictability in one’s expectations of another’s behavior and assurances that all parties will act in good faith (Zaheer et al., 1998). Relational trust can increase based on specific attention, such as a trust-building activity, or decrease through a negative spiral as a result of a specific exchange or discussion.

Negative spirals disrupt organizations and can lead to self-perpetuating assumptions, underestimation of partner capabilities, and excessive investments designed to protect against other organizational members (Zaheer et al., 1998). Reorientation, on the other hand, seeks to reverse negative spirals by reestablishing social equilibrium among parties, communicating the intention to move away from past behaviors (Dirks, Lewicki, & Zaheer, 1998). Most often, reorientation begins with an eye-opening experience that leads the relationship in a new direction. Recalibration, though similar, consists of smaller, proactive, continuous actions designed to avoid the need for substantial efforts, such as that of reorientation, in the future (Schoorman et al., 2007).

Peer support and positive peer interactions are also critical to higher functioning organizations. For example, research shows that employees who exhibit characteristics of organizational citizenship behavior—such as altruism, conscientiousness, tolerance, courtesy, and civic virtue—enhance organizational effectiveness by demonstrating a high willingness to contribute beyond required job duties, voluntarily taking on extra-role behaviors to promote organizational effectiveness (Smith, Organ, & Near, 1983). As a result, effectiveness increases to the extent that it improves performance and productivity, frees up resources for deployment to achieve broader organizational purposes, reduces the need to expend excessive resources on maintenance functions, and helps coordinate activities between interdependent members and facilitate work across groups (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1991). With a newfound stock of
resources, employees often exhibit organizational citizenship behavior and institutional commitment, readily diverting or redeploying institutional resources to achieve broader organizational goals (Kuusela, Keil, & Maula, 2017).

**Conclusion**

Through the lens of employee engagement, it is easy to see the impact of job conditions on employee performance and retention. Rather than being merely cogs in a corporate machine, employees seek meaning in their work and strongly consider their place within an organizational hierarchy. They seek trust from colleagues and hope the organization values them.

Though widespread in the business sector, employee engagement surveys and action planning to address deficiencies have yet to become prevalent in higher education. Yet higher education managers hold the power to positively shape employee engagement, lessening burnout and increasing retention. While multiple measures are used to assess engagement, ISA engagement includes a social component that considers the degree to which employees are socially connected, feel respected, and share common values—critical needs among both new and experienced student affairs professionals. Managers can increase engagement through interventions targeted at increasing trust and collaboration across offices. With trust and collaboration employees feel valued, leading to improved performance, lower burnout, and higher levels of employee retention.
CHAPTER THREE:

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research provides an in-depth understanding of our world and the people in it (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). Sound qualitative research requires identifying an appropriate theoretical perspective, paradigm, methodology, and research method, all of which work cohesively to answer the stated research question (Jones, Torres, & Arminio). In this study, I sought to understand the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience. As one measurement of the outcome, I observed the impact of that experience on employees’ ISA work engagement and their perceptions of their work environment. The following research question will guide this study:

What are the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience?

I chose a qualitative methodology because understanding the participants’ experiences in their own words was critical to answering my research question. Specifically, I used a constructivist research paradigm in which knowledge is emergent and there is no single, universal truth; instead, multiple social constructions acknowledge that meaning is assigned differently by different people (Mertens, 2010). I interpreted the research from my standpoint, and the research is a product of my own values. The epistemology of this approach is both personal and interactive. Meaning was co-constructed with the participants, and the values of all involved influenced the study’s results (Mertens). The outcomes and interpretations were rooted
in context, as making meaning of participant experiences required the interplay of my own feelings and beliefs with those of the participants (Mertens).

**Theoretical Framework**

This study was grounded in the theoretical framework of Hobfoll’s (1989) conservation of resource theory. In addition, two other key theories, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory, also contributed to understanding how employees interact with one another and how that interaction impacts their workplace engagement. Each of these aided in investigating human interactions in the workplace and exploring the outcomes of those interactions.

Maslow (1943) identified five levels of needs that guide people’s choices and provide the motivation for their behavior. The first level is the satisfaction of physiological needs for food, water, shelter, and other basic requirements for survival. The second level is the need to feel safe and secure. Within the workplace, this notion of safety includes not only general well-being but also job and financial security. Maslow’s third level, a sense of belonging, may be difficult to achieve in an employment landscape that can sometimes feel like a battlefield, filled with land mines and aggressors. The fourth level, esteem, refers to how individuals view themselves, encompassing the need for achievement, recognition, approval, and a sense of competence.

These first four levels—physiological, safety, belonging, and esteem—form the foundation for the final level. Once these lower-order needs are satisfied, humans have the potential to achieve *self-actualization*, a movement towards greater autonomy, creativity, and an overall richer emotional life; however, without the lower-order needs, self-actualization is impossible (Maslow, 1943). Maslow’s higher- and lower-order needs directly impact the working environment and employee interaction, satisfaction, and engagement. The degree to
which these needs are satisfied or left unsatisfied can influence the well-being and productivity of employees and lead to higher or lower levels of workplace engagement.

Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory builds upon Maslow’s lower-order needs—safety, security, and belonging—by emphasizing their importance in establishing exchange relations at work. Social exchange requires trust, making the crux of all transactions the act of proving oneself trustworthy (Blau). To equalize or create a balance in exchanges, employees have an obligation to reciprocate the good deeds of their exchange partner. Reciprocity reinforces trust, creates goodwill and loyalty, and serves as the glue that makes commerce possible (Blau). Within the workplace, social exchange includes the trading of employee effort and loyalty for supervisor and co-worker effort, goodwill, respect, and support. Employee loyalty and engagement become tangible benefits, social resources that are possible to obtain only through equal exchanges among all parties in the work environment (Knotterus & Guan, 1997).

Hobfoll (1989), building on Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs and Blau’s (1964) social exchange theory, described human interaction as the effort to retain, protect, and build resources. He defined psychological stress as a reaction to an environment, perceived or real, in which there is the threat of a net loss of resources, an actual net loss of resources, or a lack of resource gains following the investment of resources (Hobfoll). “Resources” are defined broadly to include conditions, energies, and personal characteristics, as well as the money and prestige generated from existing resources (Hobfoll).

Hobfoll’s (1989) *conditions* refer to status-based resources such as marriage, position, or seniority. *Energies* encompass assets such as time and knowledge that help individuals obtain other resources. Hobfoll’s theory broadens the notion of resources beyond merely physical assets to include employees’ strengths, social attachments, and sense of belonging. Hobfoll theorized
that individuals always strive to minimize the net loss of resources, perceive resource loss as more significant than resource gain, seek to develop resource surpluses to offset future losses, and act in self-protective ways when they perceive that they have fewer resources than others. The workplace is filled with constant exchanges, both overt and covert, making Hobfoll’s work applicable to understanding employee engagement.

Engaged employees, in Hobfoll’s (2001) theory, feel safe and supported, leading them to invest excess resources in behavior that benefits their employer. In such an environment, resources cross over and are freely exchanged between coworkers because of their frequent communication and abiding trust in one another (Bakker & Xanthopoulou, 2009). In an environment characterized by trust, coworkers’ helping behaviors increase the perceived pool of resource support available to an employee. Put another way, helping behavior exhibited by one employee leads other employees to perceive a greater abundance of available resources, in the form of future support (Halbesleben, 2006).

Within a safe and trusting environment, engaged employees see resource loss as a challenge rather than a threat, as trust increases their willingness to accept challenges and endure risk (Halbesleben, 2006). Social support and community thereby strengthen and increase resource exchange (Hobfoll, 2001). This study’s design sought to intentionally influence participants’ perceptions of social support and community by increasing their interaction with employees from outside their own office community and in doing so, altering their ISA engagement.

**Research Design**

The methodology employed to address a study’s research questions should always be purposeful and appropriate. Once the researcher identifies the purpose of the study, the research
paradigm, methodology, and methods should all fit together and support the study’s intended outcome (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). In endeavoring to understand the experience and outcomes of participation in a conversational learning program, I approached this study through a constructivist paradigm. I used a phenomenological approach, employing graphic elicitation and conducting individual interviews to understand the conversational learning experience and its outcomes, including the participants’ ISA work engagement.

**Phenomenology**

Rooted in philosophy and derived from the Greek *phaenesthai*, meaning “to flare up and show itself,” phenomenology captures lived human experience through its emphasis on description, interpretation, and subjectivity (Moustakas, 1994; Van Manen, Higgins, & Van der Riet, 2016). Phenomenology explores both an experience and an individual’s or group’s perceptions of that experience. Experience in this framework encompasses not only the senses—seeing, hearing, and feeling—but also intangible concepts such as believing, remembering, wishing, and deciding (Moustakas; Roberts, 2000).

Vagle (2010) described phenomenology as the “idea of how we ‘find-ourselves-being-in-relation-with-others’” (p. 394). Rather than considering merely the actions that are visible to us, phenomenology seeks to understand the deeper meanings individuals give to their experiences by eliciting rich and detailed descriptions in the participants’ own words. Phenomenology is a powerful tool for capturing subjective experience and gaining insight into participants’ actions and motivations, subverting conventional wisdom for the lived experience (Lester, 1999; Moustakas, 1994).

In this study, I used a phenomenological approach to analyze the work experiences, work relationships, and employee engagement of non-academic staff members in a higher education
environment. Fitting in and thriving in a community of employees is a deeply personal experience, and this approach allowed me to preserve the authentic views of the participants and capture the essence of their experience (Vagle, 2010). Phenomenology is particularly useful for this purpose because it creates lateral rather than hierarchical relationships with participants, altering the traditionally dominant position of research (Hays & Woods, 2011).

Establishing lateral relationships was particularly important because of my role as a director at the site where my study took place. With a possible power dynamic impacting the study, it was possible that participants might feel less forthcoming with their responses. To ensure a more informative study, it worked hard to minimize the power differential by thoughtfully choosing the interview location and questions and using techniques designed to erode intimidation. Phenomenology’s ability to equalize the social status between participant and researcher empowered the participants and allowed all voices to be heard (Hays & Woods, 2011).

Phenomenological inquiry illuminates explorations into how various groups experience or think about a phenomenon, in this case, a conversational learning program (Hays & Woods, 2011). This study sought to identify both the shared and distinctive experiences of non-academic staff members in higher education, and this methodology was critical to deriving the collective realities of these employees (Hays & Woods). A phenomenological perspective helped obtain a richer and more authentic understanding of both the individual and collective perceptions of the employees’ community and how they experienced the phenomenon (Hays & Woods). While this methodology required careful consideration of the researcher’s assumptions to avoid altering the data that was obtained, it was exactly this understanding of the personal and intimate nature of
analyzing experiences, particularly those of coworkers, that made this methodology an excellent choice for this study (Vagle, Hughes, & Durbin, 2009).

Site

The research setting for this study was a comprehensive regional university in the South that serves 12,834 undergraduate and graduate students. This institution has experienced significant enrollment growth, 10.2 percent, over the last five years (university website). Its student body is 65 percent female and 35 percent male, with nearly 50 percent identifying as students of color (university website). Overall, students at this institution have a high level of financial need, with 56 percent eligible for some level of need-based grants from the federal government (university website). Incoming students have an average SAT score of 950 and an academic GPA of 3.15, positioning the average academic qualifications of the student body at the lower end among regional universities in the state.

The university employs 647 non-academic full-time administrative staff members (university website). These employees self-identify as 79 percent White, 11 percent Black/African American, 3 percent Asian/Pacific Islander, 2 percent Hispanic, and 5 percent Other (university website). At a micro-level, the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management (SAEM), the area from which I drew participants for my study, encompasses a diverse set of offices that serve the institution’s students. The Division is broken into two sub-units. Half of its offices—Student Activities, Greek Life, Health Services, University Recreation, Center for Student Involvement, and The Office of Community Standards —fulfill traditional student affairs functions. The other half of its offices perform enrollment management functions.

The offices responsible for enrollment management include Undergraduate Admissions, Advising, the Center for Academic Success, Enrollment Services Center, Registrar, and New
Student Programs (university website). Both the university and SAEM are at a critical moment in their history. In light of the institution’s growth, the number of non-academic staff has failed to keep pace with increases in the student body, and future goals for growth make the possibility of achieving appropriate staff-to-student ratios even less likely.

As just one example, within SAEM, the Office of Undergraduate Admissions has experienced 70 percent growth in applications and 25 percent growth in admitted students over the past five years, with no increase in staffing (university website). There is excitement about recent national recognition for SAEM, as it has been named one of the “Most Promising Places to Work in Student Affairs” for four straight years by the American College Personnel Association (Diverse Magazine, 2017). At the same time, the university has received institutional recognition and was honored as the University System Institution of the Year. Nevertheless, an equally palpable exhaustion counters that enthusiasm.

**The Conversational Learning Experience**

Conversational learning, the act of conversing with others as one experiences and reflects on a new experience, differs from knowledge gained through personal experience or perceptions alone (Baker, Jensen, & Kolb, 2002). Through conversational learning, shared knowledge grows out of shared experiences and conversations (Baker et al.). The conversational learning experience designed in this study sought to create this social knowledge. Participants spent no more than four hours meeting with various members of the host office, with an eye towards understanding the office’s functions (Appendix I). For example, participants conversed with the department head to learn about office staffing, structure, mission and goals, and took a tour of the physical facilities. During this conversation, the participant was given a series of suggested questions to ask, further encouraging conversation and facilitating understanding (Appendix J).
Additional meetings occurred, during the four hours, that covered sub-areas of the office and encouraged a diversity of social knowledge. For example, if this had taken place in Admissions, the participant could speak with employees from across the office about issues as varied as outbound communications, visit programs, governmental compliance, and face-to-face recruiting. Each of these meetings would be a mixture of sharing work responsibilities, observations, and conversation around daily work responsibilities and expectations. At the end of the experience, interested parties and prior meeting participants from earlier in the day would gather for a group conversation. The host and participants, for each visit, were given discussion prompts focused on reviewing information and discussing potential collaborative projects and shared challenges (Appendices J & K). Additional conversation, as appropriate, included further discovery about the professions of those in the host office and the biggest takeaways from the conversational learning experience. Conversational learning offered participants a chance to directly interact with colleagues while gaining valuable knowledge about the work of the host office. Unlike a traditional shadowing experience, the goal of conversational learning is that the participant is an active observer. Participants were not encouraged to learn how to complete the job functions of the host office, but rather, they were encouraged to ask questions and learn about the highs and lows of the work. At the same time, this experience was not informational interviewing either. Part of the process was directly observing the work and communal interactions of the office, not merely asking questions of the leader.

**Recruitment**

To answer the research question fully, I used purposeful sampling to target all professional, non-academic staff members in the institution’s Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management who had worked at the university for more than six months. My goal
was to find participants from across the various Division offices, while also ensuring that the demographics of the sample accurately represented those of the Division (Guetterman, 2015; O’Reilly & Parker, 2012).

To find my participants, I began a conversational learning program entitled Strength of the Pack that was offered for the first time during the Summer and Fall semesters of 2017. My study served as a pilot program for a larger institutional initiative scheduled to take place in the future. For this pilot, participants were drawn only from the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. To generate interest, the conversational learning program was announced, and invitations were distributed at several managerial levels.

First, I introduced the program to the directors of each of the SAEM departments at a department heads’ meeting, in advance of sharing it with the division. This introduction included an explanation of the sign-up process, time commitment, and expectations of both the participants and the host office. As part of this announcement, I requested that offices designate an individual to serve as a contact for program participants. Second, after the start of the Fall semester, the Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management announced the program via an email to the division’s listserv, citing his support of the program and encouraging staff to participate (Appendix E). Finally, after the Vice President sent his email encouraging participation, I solicited participants for the study via the division’s email listserv and provided an online method to express interest via Qualtrics (Appendix F). From this solicitation, twenty-nine individuals said they wished to participate, and one person said they did not wish to participate.

For the twenty-nine employees who expressed interest, I emailed them (Appendix G) and attached the Informed Consent Form (Appendix H), which included a brief section at the end that
asked if they were a full-time non-academic staff member and were working in their current position for longer than six months. In addition, the Informed Consent Form also asked interested employees to identify their current office and their top three choices for offices they wished to engage with for their conversational learning experience.

To insure a diverse set of host offices and participants from across the division, prior to selecting interested participants from the returned consent forms and personally pairing them with their site, I waited seven days from the initial invitation to select employees so that my sample included as diverse a cross-set of participants as possible. Of the twenty-nine employees I emailed the consent form, seventeen completed it and returned it to me either electronically or in person. Of this population, one individual had not worked in their position for over six months and was eliminated. Of the other sixteen potential participants, there was one potential participant each from The Registrar, The Enrollment Services Center, Housing, Financial Aid, The Adult and Veterans Center, Counseling, The Center for Student Involvement, and New Student Programs. There were also two potential participants from Advising and three potential participants each from The Center for Academic Success and Admissions.

In selecting the final participants, I made every effort to match participants in a way that maximized office representation, across both hosts and individual participants. In the end, I selected thirteen candidates. I eliminated potential candidates by only selecting a maximum of two individuals from each home-office and only placing two participants at each conversational learning site. To decide whom I would eliminate from Admissions and The Center for Academic Success, each of whom had three potential participants, I considered how meeting their site request would impact the overall diversity of the study, as well as gender, and whether the position was entry-level or not. I also eliminated the candidate from New Student Programs
because they only wanted to visit an office outside of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. While the sample was diverse in terms of office representation, it was not diverse in terms of gender or race, with only one male and one African-American. The sample was also weighted towards entry-level employees, with only four participants who were not employed at an entry-level position.

Once I attained the most representative sample possible, I notified the host office of the placement and provided them with the Sample Conversational Learning Schedule and Conversational Learning Guidelines – Office (Appendix J and L). Then, I emailed the selected participants, attached the Conversational Learning Guidelines – Participant (Appendix K), and provided the name and email of the established office contact. At that point, the participants were encouraged to follow-up and schedule a date and time for their conversational learning experience. Follow-up emails were sent on October 22nd, 2017, October 29th, 2017, and November 12th, 2017 to check status and offer assistance. By December 1st, 2017, all but one of the participants had completed their conversational learning experience. Due to lack of responsiveness, the participant was eliminated, leaving twelve participants who completed a conversational learning experience.

Data Collection Methods

Data gathering for this study was completed in a four-step process. First, while completing the informed consent form, participants completed an attached set of questions focused on their background and time on staff (Appendix H). The questions covered two main areas: demographics and background and the individual’s role at the university. From this information, candidates were selected to complete a conversational learning experience and asked to complete a Pre-Participation Survey (Appendix M) that included the completion of the
ISA engagement scale, as well as a survey regarding their interaction and reliance upon other members of the university community to complete work tasks and individual employment goals. This data was used as a baseline to compare pre- and post-outcomes from the conversational learning experience.

Second, after completing the conversational learning experience, the employee submitted a post-participation survey to confirm completion (Appendix N). This survey required the participant to retake the ISA engagement scale and schedule a time for an interview, approximately one hour in length, within two to three weeks of their conversational learning experience. The interview (Appendix O) utilized open-ended questions whenever possible while also drawing on the additional responses on the pre-participation survey and observed changes between the pre- and post-participation surveys in responses related to ISA engagement. Follow-up questions, in a semi-structured format, gathered additional details to elucidate a shared understanding from all participants (Cassell & Symon, 2011).

In the interview, following a few initial questions, participants engaged in the third form of data collection, graphic elicitation. This technique, which involves participants drawing pictures and describing them, is intended to enhance participants’ reflexivity and assemble a complete picture of the employee’s lived work and conversational learning experience (Scott, 2000). My interest was not in the participant’s drawing ability; rather, the drawings were a participatory method designed to engage the participant as an active member of the research process.

Specifically, I utilized a method devised by Bagnoli (2009) called self-portrait. I asked participants to use a pen and paper to draw themselves in their current work environment. Then, I asked them to add to the drawing the institutional forces that impact their work environment,
while also asking them to reflect on their own place among these forces and within the university community. Bagnoli explained that the self-portrait technique has a condensing quality that helps narrate complex concepts and stories and generate a more holistic understanding. Further, it avoids readymade answers, evoking more genuine and candid responses. It also helps avoid silence by helping participants overcome their inability or unwillingness to answer questions, particularly about experiences that are challenging or emotionally difficult. It has also proved especially useful for situations in which participants feel marginalized or dissatisfied (Kuehne, 2013). Because of my role as a leader on campus, I was fearful that participants might feel suspicious of me or marginalized by leadership in general. This approach aided in addressing that concern. In addition, the interview itself integrated separate parts, each designed to limit the power dynamic between research participant and researcher while encouraging maximum reflexivity from the participant. Utilizing the interactions and experiences of employees prior to their participation in the research project, comparing changes in ISA engagement from pre- to post-participation, and guiding participants through graphic elicitation all provided a rich pool of data that added to the robustness of participant responses and enhanced their reflection.
Participant completes opt-in request (Appendix F)

Participant is selected and receives consent form (Appendix H)

Participant completes consent form and receives 15-question pre-participation survey (Appendix M)

Participant returns survey and is paired with a site for the conversational learning experience

Participant completes conversational learning experience and signifies completion by taking a post-participation survey and scheduling an interview (Appendix N)

Participant completes interview, reflecting on his or her program experience. This reflection includes graphic elicitation techniques to increase response depth and utilizes pre- and post-participation survey results. (Appendix O)

Figure 1. Steps to completing data collection. This figure shows the steps research participants will complete as part of this study.

Overall, this approach was consistent with the constructivist research paradigm as well as phenomenology, as semi-structured, in-depth, face-to-face interviews and graphic elicitation enable participants to engage actively in making meaning of their conversational learning experience (Cassell & Symon, 2011). Words and numbers are merely substitutes for a participant’s lived experiences (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Thus, utilizing a non-text based research method helps increase depth in articulating life experiences (Prosser & Loxley).

Data Analysis

Data analysis was primarily focused on analyzing responses from a semi-structured interview. The interview questions themselves were informed, in part, by changes in pre- and post-participation survey responses and by the graphic elicitation exercise.
**Survey data.** Analysis of survey data began by completing descriptive statistics to summarize the participants’ responses to the initial 15 questions on the pre-participation survey. The summary included a frequency distribution of participants’ demographic information, as well as frequency distributions for the participant responses to the six questions focused on the individual’s level of interaction with employees outside their direct work environment and the nine question ISA engagement scale. This data was stored in a password-protected spreadsheet, with scores only tied to participants via pseudonyms.

In addition, as a measure of central tendency, I determined the mean for the responses to each of the 15 questions for the cumulative group of participants. Responses to the first six questions were on a five-point Likert Scale, and responses to the ISA engagement instrument were on a seven-point Likert Scale (Appendix L). After participants retook the ISA engagement scale following their conversational learning experience, I recalculated the same measures of frequency and central tendency and determined the amount of overall change for each item on the ISA engagement scale at both the overall and individual levels to determine whether and for whom the conversational learning experience influenced ISA engagement. I also noted responses on the pre-participation survey and changes on the post-participation survey that I used during the semi-structured follow-up interview. Specifically, I looked for outliers in the data, so I could address those topics during the semi-structured interview.

**Graphic elicitation.** Graphic elicitation, in the form of the self-portrait technique, was also used during the semi-structured interview. In the interview, I asked participants to draw themselves in their work environment, encouraged them to discuss what they drew, and guided them through identifying what was important to them in their self-portrait. As needed, I utilized
follow-up questions (Appendix N) that addressed specific themes and concepts that emerged from the drawings (Bagnoli, 2009).

**Semi-structured interviews.** Analysis of semi-structured interviews began during the interview process itself (Jones, Torres, & Arminio, 2014). During the semi-structured interview, I carefully took notes and adjusted the questions as the focus of my study began to narrow. As shown in Figure 2, for each interviewee, I considered both sets of results on the ISA engagement scale and any changes that appeared following the conversational learning experience. In addition, I utilized the participant’s graphic elicitation to further conversation, as I progressed through the interview. These drawings helped participants expand on their experiences, allowing me to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the participants’ perspectives on their conversational learning experience (Cruz-Soto Jr., 2017).
1) How often do you interact with employees outside Student Affairs and Enrollment Management to achieve work tasks? (Ex: Torie, Always / Jill, About Half)

2) Jill → I share the same work goals as colleagues → Somewhat Agree to Agree / I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues → Somewhat Disagree to Somewhat Agree

Why the change in the perceptions of the work attitudes of colleagues?

Semi-Structured Interview

Did Deans or other faculty come up in your conversational learning experience?

Drawing of Work

The lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience?

**Figure 2.** The integration process of the three data collection methods within the semi-structured interview.

After I completed all the interviews, I submitted the interview recordings to Rev.com to be transcribed. Once I received the transcriptions back, I uploaded each transcription into Dedoose.
During my first round of reviewing the twelve uploaded transcripts, I highlighted a total of 344 excerpts, and I assigned these excerpts to one or more of an initial thirty-nine codes. Saldaña (2009) defines codes as using a few short words or phrases to capture the essence of an interview. As shown in table 1, coding helped me identify themes and narrow the study’s focus while illuminating the participants’ lived experiences. Moustakas (1994) referred to this process as horizontalization.

Table 1

Themes and Collapsed Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Final Themes</th>
<th>Sampling of Collapsed Codes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Career Exploration</td>
<td>Covet job role, curious but not as a career, encouraged for future career, exploring career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>made me ask questions about my career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Department Comparison</td>
<td>Stereotype disproved, our departments are the same, our departments are different, sympathy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>for work tasks, similar passions, made me understand why, seeing made me appreciate my work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>environment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Impact of Others</td>
<td>Unseen colleagues, unseen offenders, impacts from outside, divisions divided, working with</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>academics, seeing an intimate picture</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Analytic memo writing. Along with coding, analytic memo writing assists the researcher in understanding a central phenomenon (Saldaña, 2009). Completing the coding in a compressed time, particularly when considering ISA engagement scale scores alongside interview results and graphic elicitation, generated conflicting thoughts and assumptions (Saldaña). To address this concern and aid in making further sense of the data, I created analytic memos in Dedoose as I coded each interview.

Analytic memos provided an extra level of narrative, a connection between the participant’s data and the researcher’s interpretation. These memos allowed me to question and critique the data source, record my own prejudices and assumptions, and helped guide the
direction of the study. As part of these memos, I considered participant themes that could be
grouped even further, while also considering the relationships between specific themes and the
ISA engagement score trends and drawings of each participant.

As I moved between the transcript of each participant’s lived experiences, the
participant’s ISA engagement score, his or her drawings, and my personal reflections on those
experiences, the journey the participant experienced evolved. The participants experience was
compared and contrasted with other participants. As a result, trends amongst participants
developed helping to answer the study’s research question and provide additional clarity around
the lived experience of participating in a conversational learning program (Jones et al., 2014).

**Protection of Subjects**

Completing a study of the lived experience of participating in a conversational learning
program on the campus where I work as the Director of Admissions presented several
challenges. Without a doubt, the work I do with my employees is deeply personal and incredibly
important to me. Moreover, as a senior leader on campus, it is reasonable in a study of this nature
that I would want to see my beliefs about the work experience on campus validated. At a broader
level, I also feel a deep responsibility to my university, which has implications for my behavior
and perceptions.

My university played a critical role, during my most formative years, in helping me grow
into the person I am today. It provided a family-like atmosphere that nurtured me. Today, I most
often hear the work environment in my office described as a family. This environment exists as a
result of intentional effort, something I feel compelled to maintain professionally, ethically, and
personally. However, that intentional effort is precisely what makes the work and this study so
deeply personal.
Moreover, given my leadership role on campus, I was fearful of its impact on the researcher/participant dynamic, with participants potentially perceiving themselves as being in a position of less power (Takacs, 2003). While I knew my interest lay in understanding the lived experience of participating in a conversational learning program and its impact on ISA engagement, I was mindful throughout that some participants may be hesitant to talk with me or to share their thoughts and feelings candidly. It was also challenging to maintain full anonymity for participants, given the proximity of staff members to one another within the university community.

To address this, I utilized four approaches to address these inevitable challenges. First, the interviews took place at a location of the participant’s choice, in a part of campus with minimal traffic. Second, I used pseudonyms to ensure that both the participants’ and hosts’ identities remain confidential in all research findings. Third, I carefully constructed the interview questions to focus less on referencing specific personnel and work tasks and more on describing the experience of completing a conversational learning program, its effects on the participant’s view of the university community, and its impact on ISA engagement. Finally, to ensure complete transparency with participants, prior to beginning the study, I provided an informed consent form (Appendix H) that described the study, the rights of participants, and potential risks.

**Trustworthiness**

My intense connection to the subject and my relationship with the participants required me to epoché, or bracket, my feelings, after carefully identifying my predispositions and prejudices (Trotman, 2006). Moustakas (1994) described the essential tasks of responsible phenomenological research as suspending preconceptions; approaching the experience with a
fresh, naïve frame of mind; describing the experience from the perspective of the subjects; and carefully combining all perspectives into one true essence. Vagle, Hughes, and Durbin (2009) even suggested that semi-ignorance or enforced ignorance is preferable to preconceived notions, so as not to affect the process.

Vagle et al. (2009) encouraged a reflexive process called “bridling,” in which the researcher not only brackets preconceptions but also actively scrutinizes his or her involvement with the phenomenon. In their view, the researcher is always connected to the phenomenon in some form or fashion. Therefore, one cannot avoid the impact of this connection, only reflect on it and purposefully address its impact on the research process (Vagle et al.). Vagle (2010) suggested that this process is circular, highlighting the need to constantly interrogate the researcher’s preconceptions and their impact on the research. Ultimately, the quality of my research will depend on my ability to bridle what I know and acknowledge its influence on the work (Vagle).

My research design incorporated the use of multiple data collection methods, to increase the study’s trustworthiness (Creswell, 2014; Jones et al., 2014). My study also included member checks and analytic memos to assure rigor and trustworthiness throughout the research process. First, I emailed each participant a transcription of their interview and asked that they reply with any additional notes or concerns regarding the transcript, to ensure its accuracy (Jones et al.). Second, I wrote analytic memos throughout the research process as a means of examining my thought processes as well as the research process itself (Jones et al.). This reflection was critical in helping me better understand my findings and their implications.
Study Assumptions and Delimitations

This qualitative study took place with employees in one division at one university, and there was no guarantee that the results would apply to other divisions, let alone other institutions. The study assumed that the hosts and participants genuinely wished to participate in the endeavor and that they followed the instructions provided. Additionally, I assumed that the employees who completed the experience had no preexisting feelings, positive or negative, towards the departments they visited.

This intervention did not stand alone, as the working environment was constantly changing. However, assumptions were made about the impact of the participant’s conversational learning program participation, even as other internal and external variables continued to impact that employee. Nonetheless, it is my hope that the results of this study will aid other campuses in utilizing programming such as a conversational learning program to create connections between employees and strengthen their ISA work engagement.
CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

Introduction

Over the course of the study, 12 employees completed a conversational learning experience in an office other than their own within the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. Eight departments hosted participants, with four of the departments hosting two participants. Participants were largely homogeneous in terms of race and ethnicity; 11 participants were White, one was African-American, and all were non-Hispanic. However, participants varied a great deal in age and professional experience. Twenty-five percent of participants were ages 18-24, forty-two percent were 25-34, twenty-five percent were 35-44, none of the participants were 45-54, and only eight percent of participants were 55 or older. Among the participants, fifty-eight percent were in their first full-time position, while twenty-five percent of participants had previously worked at another university. Only two of the twelve participants were male. The rest were female (Table 2).

Table 2

Participant Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Department Visited</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>1st Full-time Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dena</td>
<td>Office 1</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aresly</td>
<td>Office 2</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Office 3</td>
<td>18-24</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>Office 4</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Office 8</td>
<td>25-34</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Office 7</td>
<td>55-64</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Non-Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In terms of employee work role characteristics, nine of the participants worked in entry-level positions, and four of the participants identified their work as data entry, with limited human contact. Fifty percent of the participants reported working in their current position for less than two years. Thirty-three percent had been in their role two to five years, and seventeen percent had worked in their role longer than five years (Table 2).

Table 3

**Work Role Characteristics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Department Visited</th>
<th>Entry Level</th>
<th>Length in Current Position</th>
<th>Data Entry?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dena</td>
<td>Office 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6 mos-2 yrs</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aresly</td>
<td>Office 2</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2-5 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly</td>
<td>Office 3</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6 mo-2 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Angie</td>
<td>Office 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6 mo-2 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jill</td>
<td>Office 8</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>6 mo-2 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Todd</td>
<td>Office 7</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>2-5 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Larissa</td>
<td>Office 1</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2-5 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>Office 6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>&gt;5 yrs</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Amy</td>
<td>Office 6</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6 mos-2 yrs</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Torie</td>
<td>Office 5</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>2-5 yrs</td>
<td>Y</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jemma</td>
<td>Office 2</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>&gt;5 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bailey</td>
<td>Office 4</td>
<td>Y</td>
<td>6 mos-2 yrs</td>
<td>N</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each participant completed an ISA Employee Engagement Survey before and after their conversational learning experience. On average, employees saw an increase, following their
conversational learning experience, in all three aspects of ISA engagement (Table 3), with the least change in Intellectual Engagement and the largest change in Affective Engagement.

Table 4

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Average Before</th>
<th>Average After</th>
<th>Average Change</th>
<th>% Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>6.64</td>
<td>6.81</td>
<td>0.17</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>5.39</td>
<td>5.61</td>
<td>0.22</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>5.81</td>
<td>6.19</td>
<td>0.38</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ISA</td>
<td>5.94</td>
<td>6.20</td>
<td>0.26</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Overall, employees’ scores increased, on average, by 4.4%. A paired t-test was utilized to determine whether the change was significant for each type of engagement, along with total ISA engagement. None of the changes were significant, though the small sample size made broad assumptions challenging. In regard to the experience’s propensity to create change, differences were seen between the three elements of ISA engagement (Table 4).

Table 5

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Increase</th>
<th>Stayed the Same</th>
<th>Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affective</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total ISA</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

For nine participants the Total ISA engagement increased following the conversational learning experience. One individual’s ISA engagement stayed the same, while two participants’ engagement decreased. Across all participants the intellectual engagement component represented the highest value; however, it was the least likely of the three areas to change. Social engagement, the lowest scoring value of the three, changed for every single participant. Affective
engagement increased nearly as much as social engagement but was less likely to change, as four participants saw no change.

Through the utilization of this pre- and post-testing, the individual interviews gained additional depth. In addition, including graphic elicitation within the semi-structured interview, provided an opportunity to gain an even fuller understanding of the experience of completing a conversational learning experience as shown in Figure Three. With the interviews complete, transcriptions of the interviews were analyzed and individual codes were developed from the content. From this point, similar codes were collapsed together into broad themes as shown in Table One. The following sections describe these findings through the themes of department comparison, career exploration, and the impact of others.

**Department Comparison**

Spending time in another employee’s office environment challenged both deeply and casually held assumptions. Participants spoke often about the similarities and differences between their work environment and that of the office they visited. This experience altered long-standing beliefs, challenged misconceptions, and encouraged increased collaboration in the name of student success.

**Student Success**

All 12 participants identified fostering student success as a critical purpose of the work carried out within the division. Dena stated, “Student success is such an obvious part of who we are as a university. We want students to succeed here and then after they’re here.” The participants reported that the common thread of student success formed a bond between the visitor and the host. Todd said, “It really came through as a message that the underlying thing is that they are and we are really all about student success, and that didn’t surprise me.”
What did surprise some participants was how student success was woven through office practices. Amy remarked on the holistic nature of the approach used in Office 6. “It’s not, ‘here, just pick out your classes’ . . . It’s like, ‘how can I help? What’s going on? How can I make things better with everything else you may be going through or having trouble with?’”

Once participants became aware of this common thread, several noted that it gave new meaning to their own work. Jill noted, “sometimes [Office 8] will send emails saying that a student is popping up on a report and I have to go in and change it. Maybe their major is coded incorrectly. Then I realized, when we code somebody incorrectly in Banner, they’re automatically out for Office 8.”

The experience not only put known information into focus, but it also helped participants gain new knowledge they could use to support students in their own work. Kimberly trains her students to refer their fellow students to other places on campus that can also help them, and because of these referrals, “it was so important to learn a little bit more what happens when we do that, where do they go, how did they help the student.” Knowing what happens when she refers students not only increased her willingness to refer students to other offices, but it also increased Kimberly’s self-confidence in the work she does with her students.

Collaboration

For nine of the participants, the conversational learning experience promoted ideas about ways to increase collaboration with their host office, to enhance student success. After visiting Office 7, Todd imagined a new part of the orientation for adult students that would focus on plagiarism. On her visit to Office 1, Larissa learned that a new student organization needed an advisor, and she volunteered to advise the organization. She also added her office to Office 1’s listserv so “[they] can be like, Oh, the Bass Fishing Club is doing this and we can get prospective
students interested in that.” Kimberly discovered a better way to do her time sheets from Office 4, exclaiming, “Why do we not do it that way? . . . Wow, that seems like a really good idea. I can’t believe I haven’t thought of that.”

Collaborative efforts were not limited to direct work with students. Todd found common ground with the office he visited because it was also brand new just like his office. He said:

I just didn’t see how we could collaborate, but now I’m kind of thinking maybe we can collaborate. If I see an article that’s about selling your brand or something or creating your own brand as a department or something, because I scan Inside Higher Ed every day, I scan The Chronicle, I scan a couple of other documents every day, so if I find an article that I think may be helpful for them based on this experience of mine, I guess I would feel comfortable sending that article on.”

Jill, who was one of only three non-entry-level employees in the study, saw the conversational learning as an opportunity to problem solve. Jill’s department has standing monthly meetings with some offices, but not with Office 8. She therefore took part of her time to talk about how a new system was being set up, how they would work together, and what was left to do. From that work, “we just kind of accidentally came upon a lot of stuff that we missed. We’re like, we probably need to get a system for that.” As a supervisor, Jill appreciated the chance to talk one-on-one with the director of Office 8. For example, she asked “how she keeps the morale up . . . because I know [their office] tends to also have a lot of turnover . . . we talked a lot about that and shared a lot of ideas of what we’ve been doing.”

I Don’t Have It So Bad

For some participants, realizing that their own situation was not as bad as they thought made a significant impact. Of the five staff members who came to this realization, four had never
worked at another university, limiting their perspective. Upon reflection, Jemma described the office she visited as doing “under-appreciated, thankless work.” Larissa remarked that “planning events for 13,500 students is a six- or seven-person job at other universities. Here, only one person manages that.” She also found common ground with the office she visited, as she often laments the lack of attendance at her events, and she felt better knowing that Office 1 worries about that too. Kimberly came to the realization that every office has its own problems, observing:

> Space is just very limited in general in our office . . . as they started to talk about some of the struggles that their office has with space day to day I thought, okay, so we’re not the only ones with problems, even though sometimes it feels like everyone has everything they need.

Kimberly also realized that Office 6 follows similar processes and faces similar challenges as her own office; for example, not having enough staff to cover events. Kimberly noted, “It’s nice to see it’s not just us, it’s kind of an everybody thing.”

Several participants felt genuine sympathy for the office they visited. Kimberly stated, “It’s really hard when people call with a problem and you don’t have a solution for them so they’re angry about it . . . I feel the pain for them.” Todd echoed this, stating, “When people [visit Office 7] they’ve done something wrong, it’s been reported, so they’re coming in on the defensive. I feel that pain for them.”

Spending time with Office 7 also led Todd to identify a connection with his work and his own struggles:

> They’re dealing really with a pretty specialized population and so are we . . . I used to call it the 80/20 rule, 20% of your population is causing 80% of your problems. Now,
look at that core group for like characteristics to identify that population. They’re dealing with a specialized population just like we are.

Similarly, Jim felt validated knowing that he is working hard and so is everyone else. “It’s like we’re all putting in 100% and then we put in 125% in our busy period.” Jemma found herself feeling regret:

I feel bad asking others to do things when we’re collaborating . . . you can just see that [Office 4] is tired. I see other people . . . worn down I guess and not as appreciated . . . and not making the money that I’m making. Not that I’m rich by the way, but comparatively it’s a big difference.

**Altered Long-standing Beliefs and Perceptions**

The experience not only allowed employees to commiserate, but also changed some long-standing beliefs and perceptions about others’ work and its impact. Dena suggested that these misconceptions are often unintentional, citing her lack of awareness about the number of organizations, clubs, and activities available to students as an example:

I think a lot of times people just think that they just handle planning stuff for campus events, but it’s so much more than that. If we’re just staying in our departments all day long and we’re never venturing out, or never communicating with these other departments, it is easy to never really know what is going on. I think sometimes it is easy to get an email saying, “This is going on,” and just trash it. It’s so easy to overlook that stuff.

Similarly, Bailey reported, “my world was opened; I had no idea that Office 4 gives internships . . . in Atlanta, and they are over student employment. I had no idea. You think Office 4 is all resumes and cover letters.”
Such a lack of interaction and awareness can also generate discontent and mistrust. For example, Amy lamented that her office, Office 8, is misunderstood:

> When I train different departments, they’re just like, man, I didn’t know you guys did all of that. I didn’t know how much went into this. I don’t think a lot of campus partners have respect for what we do until they’re able to actually see and understand our work.

After spending time in Office 8, Jill echoed this sentiment:

> I think sometimes you don’t really think a job is as detailed, like, how big of a deal can it be? So you changed somebody’s major, that probably took 10 seconds. Well, not really. Until you’re doing it you don’t know, and watching them do some things changed my perception. Maybe it is harder than I thought, and more detailed.

Jim found a commonality when he realized that the work done by Office 6 was similar to the case management he was familiar with in his work in Office 5. “There’s just a lot of case management going on for them that I wouldn’t have expected.”

The importance of perceptions extends beyond simply the work we do. Bailey, who works in housing, worries about how others on campus view her professionalism, particularly as it relates to her clothing. As a housing professional, she finds herself wearing many hats, as captured in her drawing of her work environment (Figure 3).
Bailey feels like she is constantly being judged and must be constantly cognizant of those around her.

I always imagine that people are saying, Ugh, she’s wearing a baseball cap today and some rugged boots. I’m closing a building all day today until about eight o’clock, so it’s casual Friday. But sometimes, I have my conduct hat on. I know I have my meeting shoes, my professional days, right? I put on my conduct hat, but I know that all day long, I have other meetings that I need to attend to and I need to look professional, and I need to look good; you wear different hats throughout the day as a professional in housing.

You don’t want people to think of housing as, they’re just tired all the time and they don’t look good. Because I feel like I’m also a reflection of my department and my team, right?

Through the time they spent with other offices, Larissa and Dena both saw a different side of the directors they interacted with. Larissa thought directors “were more stoic and serious than they really are, because I didn’t really know them that well, just seeing them in a meeting.” Dena discovered that rumors she had heard about the office she visited with were all wrong. “They are really great, friendly, and nice, not in a fake way, in a real way.”
Before visiting Office 4, Bailey was terrified that the staff in that office hated her.

I got so much anxiety because I’m always getting emails from Office 4 because someone’s time card isn’t approved. But meeting them, and the person who emails, was such a relief. She told me she understands what we go through, because she goes through it on an even bigger scale. It was so relieving. Now when I get those emails, I know the person and what they’re thinking.

Overall, these eye-opening experiences provided an opportunity for broader reflection on the work that employees do at the university, giving it new meaning. For example, after learning about the impact student involvement can have on student satisfaction and retention, Dena reported that the experience had changed her:

I suddenly knew that there was this great group of people that I knew were helping our students succeed. It made me evaluate our purpose as an office and how we all feel about what we’re doing. After I visited and talked with everybody, I realized that that’s what we talk about all the time in my office. We talk about wanting students to succeed. We talk about our passion for students . . . I think that definitely helped me realize my own values a little bit more.

Amy used the experience to refocus and find new motivation for the work she does. She noted that the experience gave me a kind of “this is why” . . . because sometimes in [Office 8] world it feels . . . like it’s pointless; they don’t even understand, they don’t get what we’re doing. It’s behind closed doors and I want to be kind of out there. It kind of motivated me just to be around them and hear their passion . . . okay, this is the real reason you’re here for students . . . they kind of refueled my passion and desire for higher ed.”
Behind Closed Doors

Amy’s sentiment about being “behind closed doors” emerged as a theme that intensified the impact of spending time in another office. In all, four employees declared they did mostly day-to-day data processing, and of the four employees involved in day-to-day data processing, three employees reported feeling isolated in their work. Some employees spoke of the loneliness and isolation of their work. In the drawing of her work environment, Torie (Figure 4) portrayed her work environment as a cell. “This is me in my cell, in my office space, everybody else’s silos that are barely touching and communicating and some aren’t connected at all.” When asked whether she used the word “cell” intentionally, she responded: “Yes, I did. I did.”

![Torie's Drawing of Her Work Environment](image.png)

*Figure 4. Torie’s Drawing of Her Work Environment*

Similarly, when asked to describe what she included in the drawing of her office (Figure 5), Amy responded:

> Just a computer, computer screens, two computer screens, and just me on the computer... Basically that’s just it. I just process a lot behind the screen. That’s my low... that’s been one of my biggest challenges... I’ve been here a year, like a year, almost. I would say it’s only like 5 or 10 percent of the time that I get to see students.
Amy also lamented her lack of contact with colleagues. “I guess we’re so busy. The really only interaction that I’ve been able to get is . . . when we have any kind of celebrations.”

Cumulatively, employees whose work was day-to-day processing, with limited human contact, saw the largest numerical changes in total ISA engagement. These employees were most impacted in the affective component of ISA, with increases in their agreement that they felt more positive, energetic, and enthusiastic about their work. For example, Amy was uplifted by spending time with different types of students because “all [she] really interacts with on a regular basis [are] those students that have to interact with [her] because they’re on financial aid suspension or they’re having trouble with something else.” During her conversational learning experience, Amy saw a different side of students, a more positive outlook she described as “both professional development and a positive outlet for her frustrations.” She also felt isolated from the employees within her office, and the experience afforded her more of an opportunity to socialize with other employees. Amy openly admitted that she is “bored in her lonely office and
wants to be closer to her co-workers.” As a self-proclaimed “people-person,” she covets the limited interaction she has with admissions and orientation. Her conversational learning experience refueled her and helped reinforce that there really are fun offices on campus. “I want to be around a fun office, an office that employees and students come to and love.”

Dena, another employee whose work made her feel isolated, suggested that her change in affective engagement largely relied on the change in scenery that the conversational learning experience afforded her. From her perspective, “sometimes it’s easy to burn out after coming to the same job every single day for so many years”. Torie also mentioned the change in scenery, suggesting that it gave her hope. “I [feel] bad taking money from the students, for sitting in an office and doing nothing for eight hours…this program helped inspire me to embrace my freedom of movement to be able to jump into other employee’s programs in my office.”

Whether it was a new population of students, a better chance at positively impacting student success, or simply a change in scenery, isolated employees were significantly impacted by their conversational learning experience.

A Negative Impact on Engagement

Results from the pre- and post-testing using the ISA instrument demonstrated that social engagement was the measure most likely to decline. Employees unquestionably felt sympathy for their co-workers, as indicated in many of the quotes above. However, the social engagement questions, ultimately, challenged participants to consider whether they shared the same work values, goals, and attitudes as their colleagues (Appendix D).

Bailey, one of the participants whose social engagement declined, was disappointed by the vibe of the office she visited.
I didn’t really see chairs for students to sit on and wait for their mock interview or session . . . To me, it doesn’t seem like they expected to see a lot of students. In my head, you should want your students to come in. You should want students to be more interactive.

In addition, Bailey felt the department could work harder on marketing to students, a skill she has had to improve on herself. “I think [Office 4] needs to co-collaborate with departments more often and market themselves better.” Bailey noted that Office 4 gave her a pizza cutter, which they told her was a promotional item they use to market to students. “I kept thinking, these are your giveaways? . . . I’ve not seen one Office 4 pizza cutter around this campus.”

Aresly felt forgotten and unappreciated in her interactions with Office 2. This sense of isolation led to her declining social engagement. In describing what she imagined Office 2 thought of her work, “I think that they legitimately think we just go out and schmooze all day and visit places and talk to people, and somehow [students] just magically end up in their office.” When the Office 2 staff members suggested that they were “the bad guys” on campus, Aresly did not feel any camaraderie. Instead, she felt under-appreciated and questioned their lack of perspective. “I’m listening to them say they have to be the bad guy . . . why don’t they think other people aren’t feeling that way too?”

Aresly was also disappointed to learn that there was confusion about staff titles. “What communication breakdown led to somebody asking me if admission counselors were the same thing as recruiters and the same things as representatives? I have to question performance; how was that not known?” Jemma, another individual whose social engagement declined, also found herself questioning the approach and accuracy of the employees she spent time with. “I remember the advisor in me was like [this employee] is talking to the student about keeping
HOPE and they had a 1.9 GPA. In my mind, I wanted to pull the phone and be like, HOPE? You’re not even going to stay in school!”

**Career Exploration**

The majority of participants noted that the conversational learning experience led them to reflect on their current and future career. Nine of the 12 participants held entry-level positions, and half the participants had been in their positions for two years or less. Four participants had been employed from two to four years, and two had held their positions for longer than four years (Table 2). While responses varied across position levels and lengths of employment, three common sub-themes emerged. These included exploring a future career, encouragement that a potential career is the right path, and interest in learning about a field.

Eight of the participants identified career exploration as a motivation for their participation in this experience. Seven of those eight are employed in entry-level positions. Jill, who is not in an entry-level position, used the experience to reflect on her prior experiences working in Office 8:

> Office 8 is just that next place for me, processing everything... I always enjoyed the interactions that I had with Office 8 when I worked with them before. There was only one person, two people that were here at that time... but my perception of the office is still the same, that they do good work. They’re vital, of course, to the university.

Employment tenure and age also appeared to influence employees’ interest in exploring a future career through the program. Those who did not identify exploring a career as a motivation for participating in the program had all held their position longer than two years, and most for more than four years. All of the participants who had been employed less than two years identified career exploration as part of their motivation for engaging in this experience.
Similarly, all participants aged 18-34 cited career exploration as a source of motivation. For example, Bailey noted,

I was really excited because [visiting Office 4] was something that I was very interested in . . . there’s different departments that you have to work with . . . and hopefully maybe work for and knowing what they do helps me know if I ever wanted to go into that field . . . Now if I want to go into [that field], I have a little tidbit of experience of saying this is what our school did. These are the people that I know.

**Searching for Answers**

Amy and Kimberly approached their experiences looking to address frustrations encountered in their current work. For Amy, who desires more direct contact with students, the experience helped her answer an omnipresent question: “Where do I want to be next; what’s my next step?” She reported that spending time in Office 6 reinforced her need for student contact. For Kimberly, one of only two individuals whose total ISA engagement declined, the experience and the subsequent reflection process were emotional. Kimberly describes herself as a loner in her work, as depicted in her drawing of her office environment (Figure 6). As Kimberly explains, “This is me, and that’s everybody else in the office. I just don’t think I quite fit in. I’m not a woo. I’m like, if there was a list of all of the [StrengthsQuest Strengths] ranked, woo would be at the very bottom.”
Following her conversational learning experience, Kimberly shifted from agreeing to disagreeing that she shared the same work values and work attitudes as her colleagues. Her glimpse of Office 3 helped elucidate her loneliness and failure to “fit” with her current colleagues. This ultimately lowered her positivity and enthusiasm around her current position, two measures of affective engagement. Connected to the drop in her positivity and enthusiasm regarding her current work, Kimberly noted that her role and environment did not utilize her skills fully. “I’m very analytical. I don’t like flexibility. Flexibility is, do whatever you want . . . I like the structure.” Kimberly’s visit to Office 3 demotivated her, seeing a different environment where she thought was a better fit. She observed, “I don’t want to have to explain things to people that will hurt their feelings, so I kind of thought that Office 3 is an area that I could be interested in, something where there are rules and regulations and policies. I like the structure.”

For Aresly, the other participant whose total ISA engagement decreased, the experience altered her perception of an office she thought she might want to work in. “I could see myself
wanting to work there someday . . . After the experience, I’m not 100% sure if I still see those values aligning based on culture and relationships between people.” For Aresly, career and social connections are intertwined. She was alarmed to hear that the members of the office she imagined as a future home “don’t talk [on] weekends, they don’t talk after work, they’re not in each other’s weddings . . . there are very clear and purposeful lines of who’s a supervisor, who’s an employee, and those don’t get to blur after 5.” This led her to shift from agreeing to disagreeing that she shares the same work values and attitudes as other colleagues on campus, measures of social engagement.

Aresly gained perspective about her own work experience and what she values, but the experience also left her wondering why an office would limit this sort of personal interaction. “I feel like the work we do in my office can be so heavy and strenuous and chaotic on certain days that we’ve really come to rely on the people in this building for emotional support.” Others expressed similar trepidation about the work tasks they encountered in other offices. Jemma imagined life in the office she visited, working with so many types of software and computer screens, as “miserable.” She noted, “I think about doing that all day, and I think I’d be miserable . . . geez, I would not want to do that job.”

Overall, the eight employees exploring career options reported a positive impact from participating in the study. Dena’s sentiments mirrored nearly all of those who were exploring a future career. “I didn’t really know too much about them, but I think their role on campus is so cool, and I’d love to do that one day . . . I think that is a place that would make me happy.” Of the eight employees who sought to explore a new career through this experience, all but two saw increases in total ISA Engagement. The exceptions were Aresly and Kimberly, discussed above.
In Kimberly’s case, the feeling of not fitting in with her current colleagues weighed heavily on her and her engagement. Despite seeing potential alternatives, the lack of connection with her current work environment and the fear that she would fail to find a fit for her personality impacted her results. For Aresly, the decline was a function of realizing that what she had expected was not reality. She had imagined a strong social environment in Office 2, but she learned, instead, that the office culture actually limits social interaction. This made her question how the staff survives such grueling days.

Across the entire population, the experience left participants pondering their futures. For many, this was an encouraging exercise. Dena, who is currently completing an undergraduate degree, found the push to continue and achieved greater certainty about herself and what she might want to do after she graduates. “I think it's great to be comfortable where you are but there's also this idea of do better for yourself. Always being in the same place…you're limiting yourself to new experiences.” Amy spent time discussing doctoral programs with Office 6’s director during her visit. She recalled, “She was just spilling out things and just trying to help me . . . on a personal level because we talked about different doctorate programs . . . That was really good to get her input and advice on that.”

Among those who were exploring potential career paths, the increase in total engagement was most prominent (.47) for employees with two to four years of experience in their current position. The second greatest change (.22) occurred among employees with more than four years of experience. The lowest increase (.11) came from employees with less than two years of experience. Though employee engagement varied based on tenure, following the experience, the three participants who reported that they were encouraged about their future, following their participation, saw an increase in their total engagement, regardless of tenure.
Curious, But Not Seeking a New Career

Though not directly correlated with tenure, age also played a role in participant expectations. The two oldest participants chose to engage in the experience not to explore new careers, but because they wanted to learn more about the field. For Todd, this approach was nothing new. He explained, “My StrengthsFinder says that my number one strength is learning . . . I’m always looking for some new experiences. I try to live each day as if it’s going to be my last and learn each day as if I’m going to live forever.”

Todd’s curiosity stemmed from personal experience. As a former assistant dean, he had worked with academic integrity issues at a high school before entering higher education. “I thought it would be interesting to hear about how discipline issues are handled at the college level a bit more.” Torie had an even more personal reason for her exploration. “Mental health is such an important aspect in my life . . . I do a lot of research because my son is just off the autism spectrum.”

Both Todd and Torie saw large gains in social engagement. While change in total engagement was negligible, the social component of engagement rose for both. Interacting with another office not only provided information about a new field, but also helped them see that they shared similar work values, work goals, and work attitudes with these colleagues. Tim stated, “they took an attitude I [use] a lot, better to predict and prevent than react and repair.

The Impact of Others

A third theme that emerged during the interviews was a repeated reference to the impact of individuals outside one’s immediate work environment, or “others,” on an employee’s work.
Different Divisions

The participants’ comments often centered on the various divisions within the institution. Nearly one-half of the employees mentioned other divisions within the university when conversing about their work. All five of the employees who mentioned the divisional divide indicated in their pre-survey that their work requires them to interact with individuals outside their own division, and achieving their goals relies on this interaction. This required cross-divisional interaction generated specific feelings for the participants in the study.

Kimberly noted during her interview that her current university is very different from her previous institution. “I didn’t even realize before I came here that there were divisions. I thought there were just a bunch of people that worked on campus and then everybody had a boss, a supervisor, and they had a boss.” The impact of this divided structure on employees’ daily work environment was clear. Torie discovered common ground with the office she visited in their shared frustration with purchasing office. She lamented the bottlenecks in the business and finance offices. “These people are the only people that touch check requests. These are the only people that touch expense reports . . . So, if this person’s out for the day, nobody else can help you.”

Torie’s work directly deals with helping students make purchases for their organization. As a result, the lack of communication across divisions frustrates her. “I don’t really need to know how many admissions numbers we have . . . [but] it would be helpful to know how many contracts they got approved this quarter.” Aresly blames silos:

The little silos of each office are a little different. In academic affairs, it’s not necessarily your objective to bring people in, like my office. Some care about retention, some care
about progression. You’re supposed to care about all of it, but your day-to-day stuff might not really impact all of it.

Two other participants also mentioned frustration with Human Resources and payment processing, striking a kinship with those they visited during the experience. Bailey lamented the craziness involved in filling out a travel reimbursement. “I feel like they wonder, why is this hard for me? . . . But honestly, we don’t think the way they want us to think.” Part of this confusion over policies and procedures is the lack of direct contact that this current study is trying to address. For example, Kimberly works with Human Resources all the time but admits, “I have no idea even where their office is . . . I don’t even know which ladder [division] they are even on.”

Jim envisions his work environment as a constantly raging battle (Figure 7). Jim drew himself at the center of the universe, constantly troubled by outside forces—such as a Tardis and an alien spaceship—that impact his workday. He describes these outside forces as often attacking. In Jim’s mind, some divisions “believe that there’s not enough resources to go around, making them less likely to share and more likely to try to bully their way to get resources, whether it’s space, money, or graduate assistants.”
Several participants echoed Jim’s sentiment that “each department has their own language,” but Jim imagines that experiences like this study will help address those differences. For Jim, when he understands another office he “feel[s] like we’re more into sharing and we’re in this together and it’s a team effort. When I know that, I can understand that another office got this thing, and we’ll get our turn one day.”

Bailey noted that she expects a reciprocal investment from other offices before she will give of her time. In speaking about her time in Office 4, she admitted that she is not going to go support Office 4’s programs because she only gets email invitations to their activities. “I just think they should offer to have [my office’s] buy-in, or other departments on campus’ buy-in . . . by offering for us to set up a table.” For Bailey, if she is not actively engaged by the other office, it’s “cool, but next, I’ve got other things to do.”
For Larissa, the impact of “others” stems from her feelings of not being in control. As an employee whose role involves serving as an advocate for prospective students, and who spends the majority of her working hours off-site, in high schools, she feels like she is constantly struggling to get things done. When asked to draw her work environment as part of the graphic elicitation, Larissa drew herself in a high school and not on-campus (Figure 8). Larissa views herself as an outsider because she is not physically on campus. “It’s a little frustrating. I don’t like not being able to do anything or be able to help my students . . . that makes me feel not that great.”

![Image of Larissa's drawing](image)

**Figure 8.** Larissa’s Drawing of Her Work Environment

Torie believes that the lack of contact among campus partners is only furthered by gossip. Fellow employees constantly complain, “all over campus they have these conversations; there’s lack of communication within the divisions and lack of communication within the departments.” The general topic of employee gossip came up in several interviews, even if it was not related to the office the participant visited. For example, Jemma noted that some offices are heavy on micromanagement. “You can’t wear this, you have to wear this, we can’t see your cell phone, you can’t listen to music. Just all these micromanaging rules. It makes me concerned for our
division.” In this example, sensationalizing employee gossip led to employee anxiety and concern for the entire division. One possible remedy appears to be the direct contact made possible by a conversational learning experience.

In this study, direct exposure to other offices directly influenced employee engagement. Four of the five participants who referenced the divide between divisions saw increases in both affective and total ISA engagement. For these employees, meeting fellow employees face-to-face seemed to address the affective components of ISA engagement.

The two participants who stated that their work was impacted by areas outside their control both saw increases across the board in intellectual, social, and affective engagement. Jim reflected, “it seems predictable to me on this side of this experience, but people are working a lot harder than you think. Now I think that’s probably true in every area.” When pressed for the reason why people minimize the work of others, he responded, “People need to self-aggrandize their own work, their own value, and so they’re like, of course I’m working, but I don’t know about that person over there.” This phenomenon was reflected in the ISA pre- and post-testing. Intellectual Engagement, a reflection of the individual’s own focus, concentration, and attention to their work was substantially higher in comparison to participants’ feelings about the work of others or the importance of their own position.

**Working with Academics**

Although only four participants stated that they work with faculty on a regular basis, participants consistently discussed their perceptions of faculty at the university. In line with the conversation about “divided divisions,” many employees described their work with faculty as adversarial. Kimberly drew faculty members in her office looking stern (Figure 6), as her work experience led her to believe that her purpose does not align with that of many faculty members.
“I think half of them probably are really focused on their research, maybe transferring to a research-level institution.” This is in stark contrast with her perception of colleagues in her own division. “Within our division, everyone really does share the goal of student success . . . within academics, I think their goal is to, a lot of times, I don’t think it has anything to do with the students.” Moreover, Todd “imagines that it only takes one bad experience [with an instructor] and students are saying there’s other institutions I can go to.”

Part of the impact the participants described was the way faculty made them feel. Several participants shared the feeling that they had to constantly prove themselves and their worth to faculty. Angie described her work as “getting data and trying to prove, basically, that our jobs are needed and that our programs are needed . . . we want to show [faculty] the things that we are doing to get them involved.” Angie believes part of the reason for this stems from the faculty feeling threatened. She noted, “It’s hard for us to get [faculty] on board for things like bringing SI [supplemental instruction] into classrooms and things like that because they don’t feel like they need supplemental instruction . . . Why would I need that? My students should be able to learn from me.”

Jill feels a different type of weight on her shoulders. In Jill’s drawing (Figure 9), she wrote the word “Deans” and underlined it three times. She feels she is always under siege. “With [deans] I’m thinking like policies, we want to make an exception to this policy, or, why is this policy in place? Why did you create this policy?”
Jill went on to discuss a recent phone conversation with a dean who had a student in her office. “The dean was questioning why I placed the student on suspension, I had to walk through those things step-by-step with them.” In this case, both parties were advocating student success, but a common theme participants mentioned, in relation to faculty, was their adversarial tone. Jill felt defensive because the faculty member harshly blamed her for enforcing a university policy.

Kimberly remembered a time when she worked hard to write an email to math faculty members, only to receive a response of “Okay. No period, just ‘okay.’” Although the faculty agreed to participate in supporting her academic intervention, Kimberly was disappointed by their terse response. Nevertheless, Kimberly believes she is probably treated better than most members of her division because faculty understand what she offers [because it is academic in nature] better than they understand the work of many other student affairs offices. “They understand what I do . . . some of them do. I think, in comparison to the way they maybe see other partners in our division, I think that I’m probably towards the top of the beneficial list.”
At the same time, this symbiotic relationship led Kimberly to question faculty accountability:

I always ask, is someone looking at this? 60% of students are getting a D, an F, or withdrawing in Accounting I! Is somebody looking at this? And everyone’s kind of like, I don’t know. I’ve looked at the past five years, and it’s the same, so no. I don’t think anybody’s looking at it, right? So kind of thinking about accountability, it doesn’t seem like that exists on the surface . . . It’s frustrating!

Interestingly, among the four employees who reported spending significant time working with faculty, the experience of discovering shared concerns regarding faculty correlated with a decline in social engagement, as the shared discourse failed to reinforce the ideas that colleagues share the same work values, work goals, and work attitudes and only led to commiseration.

**Senior Administrators**

Half of the participants, all entry-level employees, mentioned senior administrators during their interviews. Predictably, in discussing work in a conversational learning experience, experiences with senior administration often represented commonalities that both parties could relate to. In Jim’s drawing (Figure 7), he portrayed himself as the sun, “the center of his work universe,” within his work environment. At the same time, he depicts outside forces, aliens, that are “invading.” One example is the Vice President’s office.

Even something as rudimentary or mundane as the VP’s social committee . . . throw[s] a kink in my schedule and my plans . . . and they start it on the half hour, which is going to take two appointment slots out of my schedule for the counselors . . . HR’s broken my heart a couple of times too.
Jim stated that he “knows [senior administrators] don’t care,” characterizing them as attacking “foreign objects.”

For Kimberly and Jill, the concern with senior administrators centered on a lack of cohesive policy enforcement. They both feel the angst when higher-ups make exceptions to the rules. According to Kimberly, there is a “disconnect between the actual policy and how we enforce it.” For participants, this was often a shared frustration. The cascading of information from above was also mentioned frequently as a shared frustration discussed during their experience. Torie feels like she needs “information overload” so she can make better decisions in her work, while Kimberly feels like she is constantly searching for divisional direction. “What are we doing here? That’s my question. It would be great if you could just share that with us so we’re not feeling like we’re kind of beating a dead horse here.” At the same time, Torie underscores the challenge of serving as a senior leader of a large division, when she questioned the value of what senior leaders are sharing, not the amount of sharing. “Our division sends an email out about Internet fraud and not mental health. When are we going to start having these conversations?” In her eyes, “you need to fix the skeletons in your division’s closet . . . before you bring a magnifying glass and go giving advice to others about [another division’s functions].”

Undoubtedly, the work of a senior leader is challenging because of the pull of so many constituents, but Jim suggested employee dissatisfaction is more correlated with what he calls “the black abyss.” In his work in Office 5, Jim feels the office lacks trust from coworkers because they cannot update the referring office when a student is encouraged to use their services. They are a “black abyss.” In Jim’s eyes, employees perceive the unknown work of others negatively. Larissa, similarly, assumes the worst about senior administrators when they
fail to respond to her in a timely manner, perceiving their delayed response as a reflection of her own worth as compared to the value they place on other employees. This fear of the unknown is commonplace because of a lack of direct exposure. Kimberly confessed that from her perspective, the university encompasses “academics, student affairs, and HR. I don’t know what else is there because that’s what touches my life every day.”

Jill described an intervention that helped her bridge the gap between the lower and upper levels of administration. In Jill’s interview, she drew a picture of the university president, smiling, with the words agenda and numbers next to him (Figure 9). Jill’s perspective on the President’s pressure, related to enrollment declines, was changed by a face-to-face meeting she had with him.

Just seeing his passion for [the work], and seeing his passion for it, and saying that it’s not just about the numbers. Yes, the numbers are important, but numbers and student success, they’re hand-in-hand. That was one of the first meetings I’ve been in with him, and really seeing that on a more personal level . . . that he actually just truly has that passion for students.

Several other participants emphasized the importance of face-to-face contact. Kimberly remarked, “it’s really cool to be able to see [our Vice President] and have him say hello back; that really helps with the senior leader dynamic for me.” Direct communication may be challenging, particularly in large organizations, but it is undisputable that direct contact was universally appreciated within this study. Aresly’s understanding of the purpose of her conversational learning experience shifted after it was completed. “Getting the chance to have conversations . . . seeing where people could plug in and relationships could be built . . . this initiative serves a way bigger purpose . . . once I broadened my lens I could see the bigger impact
I could make.” It was this broader lens, for each of the participants, that helped many of them dispel prior assumptions, discover new ways to collaborate, and consider future career opportunities.
CHAPTER FIVE

CONCLUSION

Within the business sector, employee engagement receives a great deal of notice from managers seeking to impact productivity and profits. In fact, paying close attention to employee engagement has developed into a necessity for businesses seeking an edge in performance. Despite the differences between higher education and the business sector, careful consideration of employee engagement, and the role of social interaction, offers opportunities for improvement in higher education as well. While numerous approaches to measuring employee engagement exist, Soane et al. (2012) introduce a social component to its measurement by asking questions about the work values, goals, and attitudes of colleagues. These measurements, along with the traditional measurements related to employee purpose and enthusiasm, are particularly useful in higher education.

In such a highly diffused and relationship based organizational structure like higher education, attention must be paid to the social interaction between and among employees. These relationships form the basis for social exchange, a critical requirement for the business of educating and providing student services, as outlined in Hobfoll’s (1989) social exchange theory. As such, intentional interventions designed to increase direct interaction provide an excellent opportunity to positively impact employee engagement and ultimately organizational performance for colleges and universities.

In this phenomenological study, I placed twelve employees, all within The Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management, into an office that was not their own to spend four
hours completing a conversational learning experience. Conversational learning, as described by Baker, Jensen, and Kolb (2002), is different from merely visiting an office and watching employees. As part of this study, employees were asked to not only observe but also ask questions and engage with the employees in the host office. Following their conversational learning experiences, employees completed a semi-structured interview to discuss their experience. As part of this interview, graphic elicitation was utilized to increase the amount of conversation about the experience and its impact. In addition, employees completed the ISA engagement instrument (Appendix D) before their conversational learning experience and after it. The changes in these results guided my questions and solidified further points of focus for each participant. Overall, the conversational learning experiences shed light upon the opportunities organizations have to provide proactive interventions to increase engagement within higher education. The following research question guided my study: What are the lived experiences and outcomes of non-academic staff members completing a conversational learning experience?

In this chapter, I will discuss the findings from the study in the context of Hobfoll’s (1989) social exchange theory. In addition, I will connect the findings to other literature that speaks to the significance of social relationships and trust in the completion of an institution’s daily work. Next, I will introduce limitations of the study and discuss implications for managers. Lastly, I will provide recommendations for future research that I identified during the data collection and analysis process.

**Summary of Findings and Interpretation**

In their interviews, via pre-and post-ISA engagement testing and graphic elicitation, the research participants shared about their conversational learning experience. The conversational learning experience, for many participants, presented an opportunity for them to both reflect on their own career journey but also the work of their peers and cumulatively, the work of all parties
at the university. To assess the role of social interaction in the cumulative work of the participants, I utilized Hobfoll’s (1989) social exchange theory to frame my analysis. Through the lived experience of the 12 participants, the struggle to retain, protect, and build personal resources, such as self-efficacy and self-esteem, was a consistent point of conversation. In analyzing the data, I identified three main themes that provided insight into understanding the lived experience and the outcomes of completing a conversational learning experience. These themes support the literature around employee engagement and the impact of stronger social interaction within organizations, therefore, providing additional information to help managers and organizations encourage more opportunities to increase this interaction.

Departmental comparison.

All 12 participants identified student success as a priority in the work of higher education. As explored by Johnsrud and Rosser (1999) and Brown (2014), a common thread, such as student success, often helped employees find common ground during their conversational learning experience. Student success is so highly valued among student affairs employees that for isolated participants whose work primarily involves day-to-day data processing, the inability to impact student success through direct student contact was a consistent demotivating source of frustration.

Moreover, as staff members considered the work of others, they looked directly through the lens of student success. Perhaps not surprisingly, employees working in the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management viewed the ability to cultivate student success as a valued personal resource. The desire to make a positive difference was clear throughout all the participants. Nine of the participants provided ideas designed to increase collaboration, with the ultimate goal of benefiting students. When employees described a negative experience, it was
related to an office’s inability to adequately support students or, as was similar to the findings in studies by Goodman and Svyantek (1999) and Hagedorn (1994), feeling personally forgotten in the larger operation of the university.

As participances assessed the performance of fellow employees, Blau’s (1964) social exchange provided further context. According to Blau, exchange relationships form the basis for all work, and trust, above all else, serves as the glue that makes commerce possible. Participation in a conversational learning experience helped participants find common ground and develop camaraderie and trust. Similar to Kahn’s (1990) foundational work in employee engagement, study participants realized that other offices were facing the same challenges they were—such as space or lack of student involvement— which made them feel less alone and strengthened their sense of partnership and trust.

In many cases, participants were impressed with the volume of work that was completed in the office they visited, positively shifting their perception of their coworkers. Employees also strengthened their understanding of the depth and breadth of services provided by the office they visited. From discovering unexpected internship opportunities to disproving the myth that a particular office was merely “the place to have fun,” employees felt less alone and more appreciative of the work everyone else was doing. According to Jill, “lots of times we think, well, that office, they do such and such. But is that what they do, or do they do like 150 times that much? . . . Our perceptions are not reality.”

As discussed by a bevy of studies including Frank (2013), Hagedorn (1994), and Goodman and Svyantek (1999), anxiety about how others viewed the participants also played a role in employee engagement. Bailey, for example, believed that her day-to-day apparel reflected poorly on her and her department in the eyes of her peers. In her work in housing she wears
many hats, and she expressed concern that other staff members might criticize her or question her ability to serve students because she sometimes “dresses down.” Reflecting the findings of studies by Ostroff and Rothausen (1997) and Rosser and Javinar (2003), Bailey’s fears decreased when she had the opportunity to spend time with others, building mutual trust. Similarly, her fear that others did not like her because she sometimes failed to approve her students’ timecards on time was also put to rest because of her visit. Spending time with the employee who manages student timecards for the university helped her see that there were no hard feelings about this common struggle and increased her willingness to engage directly with that individual, heightening trust and fostering social exchange.

**Career Exploration**

Three-quarters of the participants identified career exploration as a major driver of their participation in the conversational learning experience. Most of those participants were searching for answers about their next step or seeking a better fit than their current employment. Career advancement, defined as a significant job resource and employee expectation by Bakker and Demerouti (2007), played a critical role in the study. For example, 100% of the participants who were employed two years or less viewed their conversational learning experience as an opportunity to explore a different career. In the struggle to advance professionally, and in the pursuit of both personal success and student success, the most common desire was to seek a position with more direct student contact.

Amy, an employee whose work entails day-to-day data processing with little human contact, visited an office with significant student contact and felt uplifted and refueled by the experience. For Jill, a mid-level manager, her experience reminded her of the work she used to do in Office 8 and clarified for her its importance and her desire to return one day. In both cases,
as discussed by Takawira, Coetzee, and Schreuder (2014), the clarification and establishment of person-job fit led to increased engagement.

For some participants in the study, exploring another office highlighted the inverse of person-job fit. Kimberly described herself as a loner in her current environment, unable to trust those around her, whom she perceived as different from herself. For Kimberly, career exploration was a form of self-preservation. In much the way that trust impacts the fluidity of Blau’s (1964) social exchange, Maslow’s (1943) hierarchy of needs articulates the importance of lower order needs above all else. Kimberly’s work environment fails to provide her the belonging she craves as an analytical individual within “an office full of woo.” Because of this lack of belonging, her time in her conversational learning experience served to lower her engagement by exacerbating her “outsider feelings” and increasing her belief that she is alone.

Aresly also saw a decline in engagement when she experienced a sudden lack of belonging. In her case, her hopes of making Office 2 her new home were dashed. Whereas she previously believed the employees in that office shared her values and her dreams, she now realized she probably did not belong there. In both cases, as discussed by Aquino (1995) and Renn and Hodges (2007), the feelings of isolation from one’s peers led to a drop in engagement.

For the two oldest participants in the study, the experience was not about career exploration. For Todd, he had a personal interest in the work of the office he visited because it related to a former career, and for Torie, the office she visited impacted mental health, a priority for her because of her son. In both cases, exposure to new ideas and opportunities to discuss shared concerns became the desired resource, and the experience provided the opportunity for social exchange. For these two individuals, the conversational experience was positive, even
though they weren’t seeking career advancement, a dramatic difference from their younger colleagues.

The Impact of Others

The impact of “others,” those outside one’s immediate work environment, was a consistent topic of conversation. Nearly one-half of the participants—everyone whose work required interaction with other divisions—mentioned the challenges and impact of working with different divisions on campus. Torie and Aresly lamented the persistence of silos across campus. In their eyes, and in the findings of Takawira et al. (2014), silos hinder employees from helping students. With such artificial barriers in place, social exchange is more challenging and the acquisition of resources is hampered, to the detriment of student success.

For Bailey and Kimberly, the circuitous policies of other offices influenced their ability to do their jobs. They reported feeling actively thwarted in their work, a response that resonates with Hobfoll’s (1989) struggle to retain, protect, and build resources. Jim went so far as to describe “the others” as alien forces, often attacking. In Jim’s mind, work is a battle for resources and employees need to be wary of outside forces that want whatever his office has accumulated, whether that is space, money, or graduate assistants. Through this persistent threat, there is an overlap between Hobfoll, Blau (1964), and Maslow (1943). Safety is threatened, which limits trust. This lack of trust, in turn, limits social exchange and the attainment of resources. As shown in this study, as well as by Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007) and Eddy (2010), trust serves as the catalyst for productive work and employee interaction.

The participants also commonly mentioned two other specific groups on campus: faculty and senior administrators. In the case of faculty, many employees saw academic affairs and student affairs to be in conflict, furthering the discourse around divided divisions. For example,
Kimberly felt her purpose did not align with that of most faculty on campus. She imagined that they were worried only about their research, instead of student success. She perceived a lack of accountability for them as well, as she often sees the same course sections leading to high rates of D, F, and W grades. Similarly, Todd mentioned instances in which students he worked with left the university because of negative experiences with faculty, leading to little or no consequences for the faculty member.

In terms of senior administrators, only the entry-level employees, those furthest from direct interaction with these administrators, spoke about them during their interviews. As with faculty members, these participants commonly believed the senior administrators did not understand their struggles, particularly when they made policies or seemingly random exceptions to policies. As discussed by Frank (2013) and Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser (2000), feeling unvalued dramatically impacted engagement. In another example, for Larissa, both faculty and senior administrators make her feel less-than, hindering her trust and sense of belonging. She felt her title often led others to ignore her, which ultimately gets in the way of doing her job and helping students succeed. In the eyes of each of the participants, unseen forces play a critical role in their ability to reach their own self-actualization and support student success.

**Recommendations for Policy and Practice**

The findings of this research can provide guidance for student affairs managers who seek to increase the Intellectual, Social, and Affective engagement of their employees. Four interventions, informed by this study, stand out as opportunities for impacting engagement: increased student contact, increased employee contact, team problem solving, and career exploration.
Increased Student Contact

At the site of this research, an effort had already taken place to separate out the tasks of day-to-day processing from student interaction. Overall, many universities have moved to a shared-service model designed to increase efficiency (Glenn, 2009; Negrea, 2016; Squilla, Lee, & Steil, 2017). For example, one office might handle the face-to-face interaction with students, including phone calls, so that other offices can complete their day-to-day work without interruption. This decision, on its face, seems effective in increasing overall efficiency; however, the results of this study call that conclusion into question. Similarly, Harter, Schmidt, and Hayes (2002) found that distancing employees from interaction with others, while technically more efficient, led employees to crave interpersonal connection and become demotivated due to a lack of purpose. Within this study, data-entry employees, with limited student contact, saw their social and affective engagement impacted the most, as they showed large gains following the experience in comparison to the general population.

If the opportunity to create student success is a resource, separating employees from students and organizational peers creates negative consequences. Intentionality and personal interaction, including unit-level relationships, are critical, as Harter et al. (2002) observed. Where changing job roles is not practical, managers need to connect their employees’ work to student outcomes. Studies have shown that managers can play a critical role in helping employees find a personal and professional connection to their work (Takawira et al., 2004; Volkwein & Zhou, 2003). For example, employees can take a temporary assignment, as discussed in this study.

To address this in my own work environment, admissions, I have begun to shift employees away from a shared service model. After witnessing how demotivated employees
were after completing repetitive data-entry tasks, I have undertaken an intentional effort to increase their positivity, energy, and enthusiasm by connecting them to a larger purpose, the students. Rather than working on repetitive tasks, employees are now assigned to students and have the liberty of working files from initial application through acceptance. To increase student contact, I have also increased the number of students working in the office. Many of these students are tasked with completing the repetitive data-entry processes; however, in doing so, they become an essential, integrated part of the admissions operation. This increases student contact and allows full-time employees to work on outreach to students, increasing their satisfaction.

**Increased Employee Contact**

Much like seeing the student all the way through the application process, intentional efforts must be made to increase interaction among employees. Spending four hours in another employee’s office is time-consuming and requires an active effort from all parties involved. Less personally intrusive efforts to increase conversation and prioritize cross-department interaction are also possible. For example, hosting a monthly divisional meeting that brings together all parts of the division for a learning opportunity serves the purpose of increasing interaction. As part of this meeting, employees from multiple perspectives learn about a common topic, and once a year, each office could share about their department to provide clarity about their role and purpose.

This approach is designed to foster an emotional bond amongst members of the organization and a stronger organizational commitment, two critical components leading to engagement, as discussed by Mossholder, Richardson, and Settoon (2011). As another example, senior leaders can prioritize cross-department and division interaction by requiring collaborative
goals or offering quarterly awards that prioritize cross-divisional collaboration (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006). Central to increased employee contact is transparency. When senior leaders provide increased clarity about organizational goals, employees can find ways to plug in to those central goals together, thereby increasing collaboration (Llopis, 2014).

**Team Problem Solving**

For the majority of participants, the act of spending time in another office was fairly passive. By design, conversation was intended to increase employee interaction, but the learning was still siloed. Many employees arrived at ideas that would increase collaboration, but the majority of these realizations came about through the participant establishing a way to utilize the services of the visiting office. For example, Larissa saw the need to advise a student organization, and Todd imagined offering a section on plagiarism in a future orientation session.

While these opportunities for collaboration are beneficial, interventions designed to maximize cross-collaboration and problem-solving should also be considered. Weir (2008) identified *team problem solving* as one solution designed to address these concerns. In this intervention, larger institutional issues are addressed collaboratively by groups of offices. For example, to borrow from the example above, the issue of plagiarism might be discussed among several offices, with each office sharing how plagiarism impacts their office and the students they work with.

After establishing a shared understanding of the impact of plagiarism, employees would then work on collaborative interventions. While Todd might plan to add a plagiarism section to a future orientation session, other employees might consider their own opportunities. For example, academic support staff might sponsor educational interventions for students returning from academic suspension, particularly those who had been found guilty of academic dishonesty. This
approach increases direct interaction and active engagement, as each member of the team seeks to offer their own view of the problem and assist in providing their own support for future interventions.

**Career Exploration**

Two-thirds of the employees in the study signed up because they hoped to learn about a future career opportunity. Whether they were simply exploring to find out if an area was a good fit or seeking a meaningful experience they could utilize in a later job search, future employment was a central topic. For many employees, particularly in student affairs, their job is their first professional experience, the pay is low, and they perceive the work as a stepping stone. Managers need to address this reality directly. Employees are almost immediately looking for their next opportunity, which provides an excellent chance to quickly and consistently expose young professionals to new challenges and cross-institutional opportunities.

While a conversational learning experience is one way to achieve this, managers can also address this need through other direct means. Helping employees set both current work and future professional goals is one way that a manager can support career development. Managers who identify future professional goals early within an employee’s tenure and match those with work tasks stand the best chance of reaping synergistic benefits. With this mindset, employee and employer work together to increase not only organizational performance but also employee career growth, recognizing that entry-level employees are constantly looking for advancement, as indicated in the results of this study.

For mid-career employees, however, professional priorities and needs are different. In this study, employees with five or more years of employment valued education for education’s sake, as opposed to valuing it for career advancement. This population was small in the study,
but mid-career employees deserve special consideration when considering interventions. While exploration of a future career may not be the focus of this group of employees, encouraging participation in campus lectures or incentivizing learning for learning sake by hosting monthly lunch-and-learns offers managers an opportunity to positively impact these employees.

**Putting It All Together**

In my own work environment, I have utilized collaborative problem solving in working with a group of assistant directors. As evidenced in this research, a lack of direct personal contact across departments develops mistrust and demotivates employees, a condition common at these mid-levels. This is because these positions often require higher-level in-office functions with little direct collaboration outside of their direct office environment. At the same time, these early-career professionals are seeking new experiences and opportunities for advancement. Based on these desires, I assisted in creating an aspiring leaders program that requires small-group interaction across different departments. The groups are designed to maximize diversity across offices, job functions, and time on staff. While the groups ultimately work to solve a shared problem, the intention of their time is to also develop personal relationships that cut across office boundaries via cross-mentoring-groups. In this way, mid-level employees receive the desired amount of career exploration and camaraderie. At the same time, these individuals, future senior leaders, experience a wider perspective, dispelling myths and increasing collaboration and trust across departmental lines.

**Suggestions for Further Study**

Future research plays a critical role in contributing to the literature and advancing management in higher education. Contemporary higher education faces threats from multiple sources, including government intervention and taxpayers demanding increased accountability.
In this work environment, the study of practices designed to increase employee engagement is critical to employee retention and student success.

**Utilizing Different Divisions**

The pilot version of this conversational learning program was limited to one division, Student Affairs and Enrollment Management. Yet, with the thematic presence of “the others” so present in this study, the population of participants needs to be expanded to strengthen its impact. For example, Purchasing and Travel were identified by several participants as sources of frustration, as participants were quick to suggest that these offices stood in the way of helping students succeed. Faculty were also named consistently as a demotivating force that was free from accountability and less interested in student success.

Throughout this study, direct contact helped to eliminate misconceptions and elucidate purpose for participants, but as reflected in a study by McClure (2008), the presence of “others” became a demotivating common ground. This is a troubling finding given that universities, as complex organizations, require the collaborative work of multiple divisions. While this study may have helped to unify a division, the results did not always improve for employees who spent time merely confirming each other’s frustrations. Further study is needed on the impact of cross-divisional conversational learning experiences to assess what, if any, effects these interactions have on the lived experiences and outcomes of the participants.

**Senior Administrators**

This study focused on participants visiting other offices and speaking directly with staff colleagues. Common across all the experiences was commentary about senior administrators. This was particularly true among entry-level employees, who comprised the majority of study participants. In the case of the few mid-managers who participated, senior administrators were
not frequently discussed. This may be because for mid-managers, contact with senior administrators is more common and therefore less mystery exists about their motives.

At its core, this study was designed to increase familiarity and decrease social distance between employees. However, as with employees from other divisions, assumptions about the priorities and motives of senior administrators weighed heavily on employee engagement, as also evidenced through a study from Breevart et al. (2014). Going forward, the impact of structured opportunities for direct contact and interaction with senior administrators needs to be studied. For example, employees could shadow a senior administrator for the day to understand their world. Less intrusive opportunities might also be considered, such as intimate coffee hours for informal conversation or guided conversations that help senior administrators share stories from their personal lives or discuss hobbies they engage in during their spare time. In much the same way that visiting an office opened the eyes of participants, future study needs to consider the outcomes of targeted attempts to bring senior administrators and employees, particularly entry-level employees, together.

Consider the Impact on the Host

Quite unintentionally, several participants were interviewed after they had already hosted an employee in their own office, and this topic came up on several occasions. Employees shared a variety of opinions about hosting an employee. Employee emotions ranged from embarrassment to pride, but clearly, hosting participants had an impact worth considering in future studies. In a few cases, employees found themselves contrasting their own conversational learning experience with their role as a host office. Future studies should consider studying the lived experiences of host participants, as hosting also seemed to impact the employees who participated in both experiences.
Diversify the Population of Participants

Though the study did a reasonable job of attaining a diverse representation across the offices in the division, the demographics of the population were not diverse, nor representative of the division, in terms of race, gender, and tenure of employment. Ten of the 12 participants were female, and only one participant was a person of color. The majority of the participants had been employed less than two years, with only one individual employed for more than four years in the same position.

While the study population reflected the disproportionate number of White women in the division, it did not adequately represent the diversity of the division or the university. In particular, it underrepresented the many mid-career professionals on campus. The population also skewed very young, with only one-third of participants over the age of 35, and contained only three individuals who are not engaged in entry-level work.

As previously discussed, participation in the study was most attractive to employees at the start of their careers because it provided an opportunity for career exploration, but the lack of diversity in the sample leaves further opportunities for studying a more diverse pool of employees. Future research in this area needs to include more mid-level managers and director-level participants. Individuals in these roles frequently interact with “others” and may therefore offer broader perspectives about the entire institution. Including a more diverse population, in terms of both demographics and employment characteristics, would enhance the potential outcomes of future studies and help determine whether this study’s findings are applicable only to young, entry-level professionals.
Conclusion

Meeting staff colleagues outside one’s own direct work environment was, for most study participants, a positive experience. For all but two participants, ISA engagement increased following participation in their conversational learning experience. While nearly all participants had almost no change in the intellectual components of ISA engagement, most participants saw positive changes in the social and affective components of engagement. This meant that following their experience, employees not only felt they had more similar work values, goals and attitudes as colleagues, but they also generally felt more positive, energetic, and enthusiastic about their work. Most commonly, employees identified discovering common struggles and dispelling uninformed assumptions as the reasons for this positive change. Employees who lacked direct student contact reflected the strongest positive impact from their experience, as the ability to connect with students led to a more positive, energetic, and enthusiastic disposition.

For two-thirds of participants, the focus of their experience was career exploration, with many feeling hopeful about their future job prospects. However, this outcome was not universal, as the search for a new job was also the motivation for two employees whose engagement declined. One of these participants realized that the office she wanted to work in was not what she expected. For the other, the experience highlighted how disconnected she was from her own work environment. In both cases, the experience decreased the participant’s engagement. Finally, the specter of “the others” loomed large over the study. Employees continued to fear those whom they did not know personally, including faculty, senior administrators, and employees from other divisions, even as they gained intimacy with another department in their division.

Overall, this study’s results highlight the need to create and implement programs designed to increase active collaboration at multiple organizational levels. Direct interaction
proved effective in shifting employee perspectives. Through this experience, employees discovered that their current work environment wasn’t as bad as they thought, and misconceptions about their host were dispelled. Amongst entry-level employees, particularly those employed in their position less than four years, the experience helped career planning and provided an opportunity for career exploration. The experience also eliminated misconceptions and helped reinforce the organizations goals and how each employee plays a part in those goals. Though sometimes the participant’s assessment was negative, because of a perceived lack of work ethic by the host or a revelation about the “actual” culture in the office, this experience was educational and impactful. Based on the results of this study, future programs efforts should focus on bridging across multiple organizational levels to address misconceptions and frustration regarding senior administrators and other divisions, particularly in instances where direct personal interactions are limited.
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Appendix A: Q12 Engagement Questions (Gallup, 2013)

1. I know what is expected of me at work.
2. I have the materials and equipment I need to do my work right.
3. At work, I have the opportunity to do what I do best every day.
4. In the last seven days, I have received recognition or praise for doing good work.
5. My supervisor, or someone at work, seems to care about me as a person.
6. There is someone at work who encourages my development.
7. At work my opinions seem to count.
8. The mission or purpose of my company makes me feel my job is important.
9. My associates or fellow employees are committed to doing quality work.
10. I have a best friend at work.
11. In the last six months, someone at work has talked to me about my progress.
12. This last year, I have had opportunities at work to learn and grow.
Appendix B: Questions Measuring Vigor, Dedication, and Absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2001)

**Vigor**

1. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.
2. At my work, I feel bursting with energy.
3. At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well.
4. I can continue working for very long periods of time.
5. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally.
6. At my job I feel strong and vigorous.

**Dedication**

1. To me, my job is challenging.
2. My job inspires me.
3. I am enthusiastic about my job.
4. I am proud of the work that I do.
5. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.

**Absorption**

1. When I am working, I forget everything else around me.
2. Time flies when I am working.
3. I get carried away when I am working.
4. It is difficult to detach myself from my job.
5. I am immersed in my work.
6. I feel happy when I am working intensely.
Appendix C: Questions from the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES) – Long Form

(Schuafeli & Bakker, 2003)

1. At my work I feel that I am bursting with energy.*
2. I find the work that I do full of meaning and purpose.
3. Time flies when I’m working.
4. At my job, I feel strong and vigorous.*
5. I am enthusiastic about my job.*
6. When I am working, I forget everything else around me.
7. My job inspires me.*
8. When I get up in the morning, I feel like going to work.*
9. I feel happy when I am working intensely.*
10. I am proud of the work that I do.*
11. I am immersed in my work.*
12. I can continue working for very long periods at a time.
13. To me, my job is challenging.
14. I get carried away when I’m working.*
15. At my job, I am very resilient, mentally.
16. It is difficult to detach myself from my job.
17. At my work I always persevere, even when things do not go well.

*Short-form questions
Appendix D: The ISA Engagement Scale (Soane et al., 2012)

**Intellectual Engagement**

10. I focus hard on my work.

11. I concentrate on my work.

12. I pay a lot of attention to my work.

**Social Engagement**

1. I share the same work values as my colleagues.

2. I share the same work goals as my colleagues.

3. I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues.

**Affective Engagement**

1. I feel positive about my work.

2. I feel energetic in my work.

3. I am enthusiastic in my work.
Appendix E: Encouragement to Participate from SAEM Vice President

Hello, Justin Barlow, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, is working to complete a doctoral program through the University of Georgia. As part of his dissertation, he is seeking employees from our division to participate in a pilot program for an upcoming, larger university-wide employee program called Strength of The Pack. The pilot will give employees the opportunity to spend half a day (approximately four hours) in an office of their choosing. The goal of this experience is to learn about another office on-campus and bring back that knowledge to your office.

Later today, you will receive an email request from Justin offering an opportunity to participate in this program. Because this is a pilot, not all staff that are interested will be able to participate initially, but I encourage you to consider this chance to engage with other offices in our division either during the pilot or in the full program that will launch later.

Thanks for your consideration,

Scot Lingrel
Vice President of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management
Appendix F: Sign-up for Study/Opt-In

Hello, my name is Justin Barlow, and I am currently participating in a Student Affairs Leadership Doctoral Program at The University of Georgia. I would like to invite you to participate in a research study. This study involves completing a four-hour experience learning about and conversing with another office on-campus, completing a brief survey, and participating in a follow-up interview. Depending on the level of interest, some prospective participants may not be able to join during the pilot. Participants will be chosen to insure both participant diversity and shadowing experiences diversity. If you are not chosen to participate in the study, the record of your interest will be destroyed.

Are you interested in participating in this research study?

Yes, I am interested in participating in this optional study

No, I am not interested in participating in this optional study

If the participant answers No:

Thank you for taking the time to learn about my research study. You may close your browser.

If the participant answers Yes:

Thank you for taking the time to express interest in my study. Please provide your email address, so that I may send you the informed consent form.
Appendix G: Email with Consent Form Attached

Thank you for your continued interest in participating in my study. For me to determine if you will be a good fit for this research study, I need to ask you a few questions. Please print the informed consent form, complete it, and return it electronically to jbarlow@westga.edu or email me at jbarlow@westga.edu and I will pick it up at your office. If you have any questions, please contact me or the contacts on the consent form. Thank you!
Appendix H: Informed Consent Form

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA CONSENT FORM:
EXPLORING THE ROLE OF SOCIAL INTERACTION IN HIGHER EDUCATION
EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Researcher’s Statement
I am asking you to take part in a research study. Before you decide to participate in this study, it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. This form is designed to give you the information about the study so you can decide whether to be in the study or not. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information. When all your questions have been answered, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called “informed consent.” A copy of this form will be given to you.

Principal Investigator: Dr. Diane Cooper
Department of Counseling and Human Development Services
dlcooper@uga.edu
706-542-1812

Purpose of the Study
The purpose of this study is to understand the impact of participating in a conversational learning program on an employee’s engagement in a higher education setting. Specifically, this study is assessing the impact of social relationships on employee engagement. Professional, non-faculty staff members who work in the Division of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management with six months or more of experience are invited to participate in this study.

Study Procedures
If you express interest in participating, your interest will be reviewed and you may be selected based on my efforts to insure a diversity of employees and experiences. Employees not selected will have their submissions destroyed. If selected, you will be asked to:

- Complete a demographic survey (five minutes).
- Answer a series of fifteen questions about your work engagement and level of interaction with employees in and out of your direct working environment (five minutes).
- Complete a four-hour conversational learning experience in a department of the participant’s choosing. Participants and hosting department will be provided a sample agenda and discussion questions.
- Following the conversational learning experience, complete a nine-question engagement survey and schedule a follow-up interview (five minutes)
- Participate in a one-hour interview to discuss their experience.
- Interview questions will encourage reflection on the experience and changes in the participant’s ISA Engagement Scale.
- Participants, as part of the interview, will be asked to draw a self-portrait to aid in the reflection process.
- Following interview transcription, participants will be asked to review the interview transcript and give feedback. (20 minutes)
- The total time commitment for this study is approximately five hours.
Risks and discomforts

• Discussing a conversational learning experience with a fellow employee may cause discomfort or uncertainty, even with the use of pseudonyms and a commitment to confidentiality. To address this, interviews will take place at a location of the participant’s choosing; however, reflecting on conversational learning, within a university community still has the potential to create uncomfortable situations. Participants are free to stop at any time.

• While individuals and offices will be protected by pseudonyms, employee participation will be known to the office they shadow, just by the nature of the experience. To address this, any written results from the study will address larger themes and not describe specific situations that might unintentionally divulge the participant and their responses.

• Participants, during their conversational learning experience, may be exposed to potentially confidential information or upsetting/challenging student interactions. Every effort will be made to script the conversational learning experience to prevent difficult situations.

• Participants, though cleared to participate by their supervisor, may need to temporarily catch-up on work he or she missed during their conversational learning experience. Prior conversations with division directors will encourage participation and support of this endeavor. Though the work may still need to completed, every effort will be made to insure that participation is encouraged by supervisors.

Benefits

• Participating in this research study adds to a participant’s knowledge of other offices at the university which may be beneficial in future working relationships or in determining future career paths

• At an institutional level, increasing social interaction will help with inter-departmental communication and collaboration.

Audio/Video Recording

Audio recording will be used to assist the researcher in data analysis. The recordings will be archived after transcription for no greater than 1 year. At the close of that 1 year, if not earlier, the recordings will be destroyed. Recordings will be stored in a folder that is password protected on the researcher’s laptop.

Please provide initials below if you agree to have this interview audio recorded or not. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have the interview recorded.

I do not want to have this interview recorded.

I am willing to have this interview recorded.

Participant Drawings

Participants will be asked to draw based on prompts. These drawings will be used during research analysis and may be utilized in other forums discussing the research. The participant will only be referenced by their pseudonym. Please provide initials below if you agree to have drawings used. You may still participate in this study even if you are not willing to have your drawings used.

I do not wish to have my drawings utilized for this research.

I am willing to have my drawings utilized for this research.
Privacy/Confidentiality
The data collected in this research study will not identify you directly or the office you visit but will utilize pseudonyms to discuss your response. Pseudonyms will be linked to the actual demographic data collected at the start of the study, and the document holding this linkage will be password protected and stored on the researcher’s laptop. Once the pseudonym is created, all mention of an individual or the office they visit will reference pseudonyms only. This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed. This project’s research records may be reviewed by departments at the University of Georgia responsible for regulatory and research oversight. The researcher will not, however, release identifiable results of the study to anyone other than individuals working on the project without your written consent unless required by law.

Taking part is voluntary
Participating in this study is voluntary and will not impact your employment. You may refuse to patriciate before the study begins, and discontinue at any time, with no penalty or loss of benefits, including employment, to which he/she is otherwise entitled. If you decide to stop or withdraw from the study, the information/data collected from or about you up to the point of your withdrawal will be kept as part of the study and may continue to be analyzed.

If you have questions
The main researcher conducting this study is Justin Barlow, a graduate student at the University of Georgia. Please ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you may contact Justin Barlow at justinrobertbarlow@yahoo.com or at 678-796-4026. If you have any questions or concerns regarding your rights as a research participant in this study, you may contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) Chairperson at 706.542.3199 or via email at irb@uga.edu. You may also contact irb@westga.edu.

Research Subject’s Consent to Participate in Research:
To voluntarily agree to take part in this study, you must sign on the line below. Your signature below indicates that you have read or had read to you this entire consent form, and have had all of your questions answered.

_________________________   _______________________  _________
Name of Researcher    Signature    Date

_________________________   _______________________  __________
Name of Participant    Signature    Date

Please sign both copies, keep one and return one to the researcher.

Initial Interest Survey

Thank you for completing the informed consent. Please answer the following questions.

The answers to these questions will be used to determine your eligibility for the study. If you are
not chosen to participate in the study, all of your responses will be destroyed. Justin Barlow will notify you if you have or have not been chosen. Thank you for your willingness to participate.

Name: _______________________

Email: ____________________________

Phone #: ________________________________

What is your current position at The University of West Georgia? ________________

How many years and months have you worked at The University of West Georgia? __________

Are you a non-student, professional staff member? Yes/No

Are you a faculty member? Yes / No

What office would you like to complete a learning experience in – First Choice: _________

What office would you like to complete a learning experience in – Second Choice: _______

What office would you like to complete a learning experience in – Third Choice: ________

Please email jbarlow@westga.edu once your form is complete and I will pick it up from you and answer any questions you may have.
Appendix I: Prewritten Email Response Based on Selected Participants

Notification for Those Not Eligible:

(Faculty members, Student staff members, individuals who have been employed less than six months):

Greetings,

Thank you for taking the time to express interest in my study. Based on your responses, you do not meet the criteria to participate. Please understand this is not about you, rather the guidelines dictating this research. Thank you for your interest and please consider the full Strength of The Pack program once it launches on-campus.

Warmest Regards,

Justin Barlow
jbarlow@westga.edu

Notification of Eligibility:

Greetings,

Thank you for taking the time to express interest in my study. Based on your responses, you have been selected to participate in my study. To begin your participation, please complete the pre-experience survey. Following this survey, I will assist you in setting up a conversational learning experience. Following that, you will complete a post-experience survey. As part of my study, you will be asked to select a pseudonym for use throughout the study. You will also participate in an interview. During the interview, I will ask a series of semi-structured interview questions. A few weeks later, you will receive a transcription of our interview, and you will need
to reply with any additional notes or concerns regarding the transcript’s accuracy. If you are not selected to participate, all of your responses will be destroyed.

Don’t hesitate to contact me with any questions.

Warmest Regards,

Justin Barlow

jbarlow@westga.edu
Appendix J: Sample Conversational Learning Schedule

Conversational Learning Experience in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions

The mission of this program is to provide collaborative opportunities to promote engagement and enhancement of learning across campus. Here is your outline for your intended day of participation:

Visit Location: Office of Undergraduate Admissions  
Date and Time: Wednesday, March 29th, 2017  
Primary Office Contact: Justin Barlow  
Program Participant: John Doe  
Proposed Schedule (each office’s duties will vary):

8:00am - 9:00am  - Admissions Staff Member: Justin Barlow, Director of Admissions  
Review office staffing, structure, departmental mission & goals, and physical tour

9:00am - 9:30am  - Admissions Staff Member: Johnathan Williams, Assistant Director - Communications  
Review prospect management system, web outreach, and communication plan.

9:30am - 10:00am - Admissions Staff Member: Evan Jaynes, Associate Director - Campus Visits and Outreach  
Review campus visit program, to include on- and off-campus events

10:00am - 10:30am - Admissions Staff Member: Katie Ross, Associate Director - Operations or Nicole Wolfe, Assistant Director - Operations  
Review application processing and decision-making methods.

10:30am - 11:00am - Admissions Staff Member: Allyson Bretch, Associate Director - Recruitment or Katie Taylor, Assistant Director - Recruitment/Transfer  
Overview of recruitment plans and strategies

11:00am - 12:00pm - Admissions Staff Member: Office Members  
Discussion of collaboration with respective departments, impact, and summary of experience
Appendix K: Conversational Learning Guidelines - Participant

**Participant Responsibilities**

Prior to the day of the program, the participant must:
- Initiate contact with the host department to work out final scheduling details
- Prepare a list of questions for the host department (sample questions will be provided).

On the day of the visit, the participant must:
- Be punctual, arriving on the designated program date and at the designated time.
- Play an active role in the program experience. This entails:
  - Taking notes
  - Asking prepared questions or other questions as they arise
  - Sharing ideas for collaboration and impact between the participant’s department and the host department

**Question Prompts**

**Discussion with Director**

**Topics**
- Mission and goals of department
- Discussion of organizational structure
- Comprehensive exposure to department responsibilities (30,000-foot view)

**Questions for Participant to Ask**
- What’s your favorite part of working in your department?
- What made you decide to work in your department?
- What accomplishment are you most proud of for your team?
- How is your department looking to support the university’s vision (Best Comprehensive University in America . . .)?
- What does student success mean to you and how do you strive to achieve it in your department?

Feel free to ask any follow-up questions based on the information you are given.

**Individual Sessions**

**Topics**
- Observing and conversing with individual members of the host department to obtain knowledge of and experience with each of their functional areas.

**Questions for Participant to Ask**
- What are your primary responsibilities?
- What’s your favorite part of working in your department?
• What is the most fulfilling aspect of your specific position?
• How do you feel you directly impact student success?
• How does your role impact the overall mission of the department?

Feel free to ask any follow-up questions based on the information you are given or about the specific responsibilities of the person with whom you are interacting.

**Host Office Team Discussion**

**Topics**
- Review of the conversational learning experience
- Existing collaborative efforts between the departments and conversation regarding opportunities for future collaboration

**Questions for Participant to Ask**
- What do you wish my department knew about your department?
- Is there anything you want to know or clarify about my department?
- What accomplishment/initiative/program is your department most proud of or have you had the most success with?
- If resources weren’t an issue, what dream collaboration project would you want our departments to have?
- What’s the best way for someone to prepare for a career in your field? (if you are interested in that field)

You can also utilize this time to get to know the person who has visited your department. Ask them questions about what they like to do, their background in higher education, what they like about the university, etc.
Appendix L: Conversational Learning Guidelines - Office

Host Office Responsibilities

Each department interested in hosting participants for the conversational learning program will provide a detailed schedule to participants at least 24 hours prior to the visit.

On the day of the visit, the host department must provide a format that allows the participant to gain the most knowledge from the experience. This ideally will include an introductory discussion with the department director (a list of questions will be provided to help guide participants). This discussion will include the following topics:

- Mission and goals of department
- Discussion of organizational structure
- Comprehensive exposure to department responsibilities (30,000-foot view)

Following this discussion, the participant will transition to meeting with individual members of the host department to gain knowledge of and experience with each of their functional areas. A list of questions will be provided to help guide participants.

Finally, all those involved in the day will come together for a large group discussion. This discussion can and should address the following topics:

- General Q&A (a list of questions will be provided to help guide participants)
- Existing collaborative efforts between the departments and opportunities for future collaboration.

At the end of the experience, the host will provide the participant with a designated office contact(s) for future outreach between the two departments.

Question Prompts:

Discussion with Director

Topics

- Mission and goals of department
- Discussion of organizational structure
- Comprehensive exposure to department responsibilities (30,000-foot view)

Suggested Follow-up Questions for Director to Ask

- Why did you have an interest in visiting with our department?
- What were your perceptions of our department prior to this experience?
- What are some ways you think our departments can collaborate more?

Individual Sessions

Topics
• Meeting and conversing with individual members of the host department to gain knowledge of and experience with each of their functional areas.

Suggested Follow-up Questions for Individual Sessions
  • Respond to participant questions and provide details about what you do and how you might collaborate in the future.

Large Group Discussion

Topics
  • Review of the experience
  • Existing collaborative efforts between the departments and opportunities for future collaboration.

Questions for Host Department to Ask
  • What is one thing you learned or experienced today in our office that surprised you?
  • What interested you about our department?
  • What do you enjoy working on most in your department?
  • What are some ways you think our departments can collaborate more?
  • If resources weren’t an issue, what dream collaboration project would you want our departments to have?

You can also utilize this time to get to know the person who has visited your department. Ask them questions about what they like to do, their background in higher education, what they like about the university, etc.
Appendix M: Pre-Participation Survey

The following questions are intended to help understand your current and past work experiences. Every effort will be made to protect your responses and ensure anonymity.

Name:

Email:

Phone #:

Current Office of Employment:

Please list all previous and current professional work experience (include workplace, length of employment, and title):

Gender: female/male/other

Race:

Ethnicity:

Age:

*These statements are evaluated by the participant on a 5-point Likert Scale (1 - Never, 2 - Sometimes, 3 - About Half the Time, 4 - Most of the time, 5 - Always)*

1) I interact with employees outside my immediate office environment to complete work tasks.
2) I interact with employees outside of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management to complete work tasks.
3) I interact socially with university employees who do not work in my immediate office environment.
4) I interact socially with employees outside of Student Affairs and Enrollment Management.
5) I rely on the work of others outside of my office to achieve my employment goals.
6) I am satisfied with my current employment.

The following statements, taken from the ISA engagement scale (Soane et al., 2012), are evaluated by the participant on a 7-point Likert Scale (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree)

1. I focus hard on my work.
2. I concentrate on my work.

3. I pay a lot of attention to my work.

4. I share the same work values as my colleagues.

5. I share the same work goals as my colleagues.

6. I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues.

7. I feel positive about my work.

8. I feel energetic in my work.

9. I am enthusiastic in my work.
Appendix N: Post-Participation Survey

Thank you for completing your conversational learning experience. Please answer the following questions. Once your response is received, Justin Barlow will reach out to schedule your interview. Again, thank you for your continued participation.

Name:

Email:

Phone #:

The following questions are evaluated by the participant on a 7-point scale (strongly disagree, disagree, somewhat disagree, neutral, somewhat agree, agree, and strongly agree)

1. I focus hard on my work.

2. I concentrate on my work.

3. I pay a lot of attention to my work.

4. I share the same work values as my colleagues.

5. I share the same work goals as my colleagues.

6. I share the same work attitudes as my colleagues.

7. I feel positive about my work.

8. I feel energetic in my work.

9. I am enthusiastic in my work.
Appendix O: Semi-Structured Interview

Part One

Please describe your position and an average workday at the university.

Please describe your learning experience as a result of the conversational learning experience.

Follow-up question(s):
- What did you learn from the experience?
- What surprised you most about the experience?
- What do you think would be challenging about working in the office you visited?
- What do you think would be rewarding about working in the office you visited?
- Did you identify any ways that your own office might collaborate differently/more effectively with the office you visited?

Graphic Elicitation

I will provide the participant with a piece of paper and pen and instruct them as follows:

Thank you for answering those questions. For the next part of our interview, I am going to ask you to draw some things for me. Please know that your talent as an artist is not being judged. You have as much time as you need; please respond to my prompts by drawing the following:

1) Please draw yourself, as you see yourself, in your current work environment and let me know when you are finished.

2) Please add to your drawing members of the university community who impact your daily work and let me know when you are finished.

Part Two

1) Please describe the picture you have drawn.
   - Why did you draw yourself that way?
   - How does it feel to see a picture of yourself in your work environment?
   - Point out each element: What does <the element> mean to you?
   - Point out each external force: What does <external force> mean to you?

2) How would you describe your interaction with employees outside of your “home” office?
   - Can you give me an example of those types of interactions?
   - Explain the ways that you rely on your peers at the institution.
   - What do you think other offices think about your office?

3) How did it feel to interact with other employees via the conversational learning program?
   - Did interacting with these employees change your perception of them?
   - Did interacting with these employees change your perception of the office in general?
4) Do you believe that everyone at the university is working towards a common goal?
   • What is that goal?
   • What is your office’s part in reaching that goal?
   • What role does the office you visited play in reaching that goal?

5) Given everything you have shared about your experience working on campus, what is one thing you would want to share with someone who does not work there?

6) ISA Engagement questions based on changes:
   • Your answers changed on X question. Please explain why.
   • Do you think that spending time with other employees on campus impacted your answer?

7) Is there anything else you would like me to know about your experience?