The Relationship Between Perceived Institutional Support and Student Experience

for Employer Selection, Employee Persistence, and Career Path Among Community-Engaged Faculty and Staff Members

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this cross-sectional study was to explore the potential relationship between the employment decisions of faculty and staff members who participate in community engagement and their perceptions of organizational support for community engagement. Findings indicated that perceptions of organizational support can influence employment decisions, especially for individuals who participated in community engagement activities as students.

Keywords: organizational support, recruitment, retention, service learning, outreach

INTRODUCTION

The advancement of community engagement is critical to the mission of higher education (Saltmarsh & Hartley, 2011), and success in sustaining engagement is dependent upon acceptance at the individual and organizational level (Furco, 2002; Furco, 2009). Emphasis is often placed on a structural-organizational perspective due to the large volume of existing literature exploring the importance of organizational infrastructure in institutionalization efforts (Bringle & Hatcher, 2000; Furco, 2002; Furco, 2009; Sandmann, Thornton, & Jaeger, 2009; Welch & Saltmarsh, 2013). Such an approach may fail to account for the reciprocal nature of the institutionalization process and inadequately account for the individuality of an institution and the individual motivations of its constituents (Furco & Holland, 2013). Institutionalization represents an organizational change process for colleges and universities that is dependent upon the reciprocity of the relationship between institutional value and individual engagement. For institutions seeking to advance service learning and community engagement, effectively hiring, developing, and retaining engaged faculty and staff members are imperative.

Demonstrating an evident value for community engagement indicative of institutionalization may become a universally advantageous human resources strategy for higher education as employment trends indicate an increase in demographics internally motivated to participate in community engagement initiatives. For example, participation in community engagement has been self-reported as higher among women and individuals of color (Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; O'Meara, 2013; Parkins, 2008; Vogelgesang, Denson, & Jayakumar, 2010; Ward, 2010). Furthermore, the millennial generation represents a rapidly growing employment category in higher education (Lewing & York. O'Meara, 2013), and a strong affinity for social causes and community engagement is often a significant descriptor of the group as well (Howe & Strauss, 2000). According to a 2016 report examining millennial employee engagement (Cone Communications, 2016), 76% of millennials surveyed considered a company's social and environmental commitments when identifying organizations in which to pursue employment, 83% reported they would be more loyal to a company that supported opportunities to contribute to social issues, 64% stated they would not pursue a job for an employer that did not demonstrate corporate social responsibility practices, 88% responded that it is important their employer shares goals related to corporate social responsibility efforts, and 75% stated they would take a pay cut to work for a socially responsible company. The purpose of this article is to explore the potential relationship between the level of support for community engagement that a college or university demonstrates and the employment decisions of higher education professionals (i.e., faculty and staff) who participate in community engagement.

Perception of Organizational Support

Institutionalization is reciprocal in nature, as administrators seeking to establish a culture of community engagement need faculty and staff acceptance in the same manner that the manifestation of faculty and staff motivations to engage is largely dependent upon institutional support (Jacoby, 2015). An alignment of value and action from both parties is essential to the change process. Considering that institutionalization is an organizational change process (Furco & Holland, 2013), organizational management and change theories provide a rich framework for the exploration of relationships between culture, values, and practices. Individual professionals choose to participate in and promote community engagement due to a variety of individual factors, such as teaching goals (O'Meara & Niehaus, 2009; Parkins, 2008) and personal commitments to community engagement (Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; Lewing & York, 2017). However, organizational setting is imperative to establishing value and support for community engagement since institutional reward systems that do not prioritize and incentivize engagement can supersede individual motivations and deter participation (Colbeck & Weaver, 2008; Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; O'Meara, 2003; O'Meara, 2013).

The reciprocal nature of institutionalization is reflected in Organizational Support Theory (OST), which posits that the relationship between employee and organization is a dynamic and reciprocal social exchange (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986; Eisenberger & Stinglhamber, 2011; Kurtessis et al., 2017; Shore & Shore, 1995). According to OST, organizations benefit from increased employee engagement when individual employees develop a positive perception of support stemming from a belief that the organization values their contributions and is supportive of their needs. A positive perception of support then encourages a heightened commitment from the employee to the larger goals of the organization. The OST framework can also be applied to the dynamic relationship between individual higher education professionals (i.e., faculty and staff) and their respective colleges and universities, considering the influence institutional environment has on individuals' decisions to engage in service learning and community engagement.

Point of Introduction

OST demonstrates the balance between value and action on the part of employee and organization. Employees tend to engage in actions that they believe the organization values. In much the same manner, faculty and staff tend to participate in community engagement when the university explicitly values it (O'Meara, 2013). The presence of community engagement centers, faculty development programs, and promotion systems that prioritize community engagement can support perceptions of organizational value (Furco, 2009). Participation in community engagement is a counter-normative and often unfamiliar undertaking, especially for faculty (Chism, Palmer, & Price, 2013), and individuals often do not engage due to a lack of experience with community engagement. Organizational value and perception of support, therefore, not only reward participation, but also incentivize it.

In a study of millennial faculty members that utilized service learning in their teaching (Lewing & York, 2017), those interviewed discussed how their individual commitment to community engagement as early career professionals was encouraged and validated by what they felt was a sense of organizational support for community engagement. However, the point of introduction to and prior experience with community engagement as students were also contributing factors. Participants who reported lower levels of engagement as undergraduates were often unfamiliar with service learning and community engagement at the onset of their careers; they became involved after being introduced as professionals through peer and administrative support. In contrast, participants who reported highly engaged student experiences sought employers that valued community engagement and chose to remain at their respective institutions due to the shared value.

The effect of prior experiences and internal motivators aligns with the framework of Astin's (1993) Input-Experience-Output (IEO) model. Originally developed to explain the manner in which student outcomes and experiences are influenced by internal (i.e., individual) and external (i.e., organizational) variables, the IEO model provides an appropriate mechanism to conceptualize the motivations in terms of service learning and community engagement (O'Meara, 2013). An understanding of faculty motivations, including point of introduction, is critical to institutionalization efforts, and an awareness of the relationship between an individual's student and professional experiences may further support such efforts.

Purpose

The current study provides an exploration of the association between perceptions of organizational support, undergraduate experiences, and the employment decisions of higher education professionals participating in community engagement (i.e., curricular service learning, communitybased research, and co-curricular community engagement activities). Contextualized through a theoretical framework of OST and the IEO model, results may support a human resources paradigm for the institutionalization of community engagement and further reflect the dynamic association between organizational value and employee engagement in the change process.

METHODS

Study Design

The current study utilized a crosssectional survey designed to examine trends in the environments, perceptions, and experiences of higher education professionals who participate in community engagement activities. Cross-sectional study designs are common in educational research and are appropriate for the examination of percepparticipants and practices of (Creswell, 2012). In addition to demographic information, the current study included eight primary variables: (a) the individual's perceived level of institutional support for community engagement, (b) the presence of an institutional support structure (i.e., center), (c) whether or not individual perceptions of institutional support influenced their desire to obtain employment at their current institution, (d) whether or not individual perceptions of institutional support influenced their desire to remain at their current institution, (e) level of involvement in community engagement during individual's undergraduate experience, (f) level of involvement in community engagement during individual's graduate experience, (g) the influence of undergraduate experience on choosing a career path in higher education, and (h) the influence of graduate experience on choosing a career path in higher education.

Participants

Purposeful sampling was utilized in the current study, as potential participants were contacted through the email distribution lists of two national organizations that support community and civic engagement initiatives in higher education. Individuals engaged in these organizations allowed for an examination of professionals likely to support community engagement activities and potentially employed at supportive institutions. The 80 participants who chose to participate in the electronic survey were full -time higher education professionals (i.e., faculty, staff, and administrators) who selfidentified as involved in community engagement initiatives. Of those choosing to participate, 42 (52.5%) were female, 31 (38.75%) were male, and 7 (8.75%) chose not to identify. In terms of race and ethnicity, participants were asked to select all options to which they identified: 3 (3.75%) identified as Asian, 3 (3.75%) as Black, 13 (16.25%) as Hispanic, and 58 (72.5%) as White, and 5 (6.25%) chose not to respond.

Eighteen (22.5%) of the participants were less than 36 years of age, 38 (47.5%) were between 36 and 56 years of age, 19 (23.75%) were greater than 56 years of age, and 5 (6.25%) chose not to respond. Nine (11.25%) participants were student affairs staff members, 9 (11.25%) were pretenured faculty members, 22 (27.5%) were tenured faculty members, 18 (22.5%) were non-tenure track faculty members, 4 (5%) were academic administrators with faculty status (i.e., dean), 13 (16.25%) were academic affairs staff without faculty status, and 5 (6.25%) chose not to respond.

Data Collection

Data were collected via an anonymous web-based survey using a secure online survey platform. Institutional review board approval was granted prior to starting the research study, and participants demon-

strated informed consent prior to accessing the survey.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS software. In addition to descriptive statistics, analysis of variable cross-tabulations was conducted through chi-square tests that allow the determination of associations between the expected and observed frequencies and potential associations of noninterval variables (Creswell, 2012). The null hypothesis of the chi-square test is that the variables are independent and no relationship exists, and significant relationships were determined by p <.05.

RESULTS

The primary variables included in the current study were (a) the individual's perceived level of institutional support for community engagement, (b) the presence of an institutional support structure (i.e., center), (c) whether or not individual perceptions of institutional support influenced their desire to obtain employment at their current institution, (d) whether or not individual perceptions of institutional support influenced their desire to remain at their current institution, (e) level of involvement in community engagement during individual's undergraduate experience, (f) level of involvement in community engagement during individual's graduate experience, (g) the influence of undergraduate experience on choosing a career path in higher education, and (h) the influence of graduate experience on choosing a career path in higher education.

Perceived Levels of Support

Participants were asked if they perceived their institutions as "very supportive," "supportive," or "unsupportive" of community engagement. Forty-four (55%) identified their institutions as very supportive, 35 (43.75%) identified their institutions as supportive, and one individual (1.25%) identified his or her institution as unsup-

portive. Community engagement support structures are typically identified as an indicator of institutional support (Furco, 2002; Furco, 2009), and 62 (71.3%) of the participants reported the presence of such a coordinating entity within their college or university. However, no significant associations were demonstrated between the presence of a coordinating structure and perceived levels of support. In addition, no significant associations were observed between race, position, age, or gender and perceptions of support.

Effect of Perceived Support on Employment Decisions

When asked if participants' perception of organizational support for community engagement influenced their decision to pursue employment at their current institution, no significant association was found, as 29 (33.3%) responded "yes," and 51 (58.6%) responded "no." However, a significant association, X2(2, N = 80) =9.36, p = .009, was observed between perception of support and desire to persist. Sixty-two (71.3%) participants reported an effect of perception of support on decision to remain. When responses to the two questions were analyzed, 17 (19.5%) participants stated that perception of support influenced neither decision to pursue nor retain employment, one (1.1%) stated that perception influenced decision to pursue only, 28 (32.2%) reported that perception influenced both decision to pursue and retain their positions, and 34 (39.1%) reported that perception affected desire to retain their positions only.

Effect of Student Experience on Employment Decisions

Participants were asked to evaluate their involvement in community engagement activities as undergraduate and graduate students. Thirteen (14.9%) participants reported being "very involved" as undergraduate students, 37 (42.5%) reported being "somewhat involved," and 30 (34.5) reported being "not involved." Sixteen

(20%) reported being "very involved" as graduate students, 30 (37.5%) reported being "somewhat involved," 29 (36.25%) reported being "not involved," and five (6.25%) chose not to respond. Of the participants who responded to the question regarding undergraduate and graduate experience with community engagement, 45 (51.7%) indicated consistent involvement levels, 16 (18.3%) indicated a decrease in involvement from undergraduate to graduate, and 14 (16%) stated their level of involvement increased as graduate students.

Participants reporting higher levels of undergraduate community engagement experience tended to report a greater influence of their undergraduate community engagement experiences on their decision to pursue a career path in higher education. A significant association, X2(1, N = 48) =4.61, p = .03, was observed between level of undergraduate involvement and influence of student experience on career path. Individuals who reported being "somewhat involved" or "very involved" as undergraduates or graduates were asked if their involvement influenced their decision to pursue a career in higher education. Thirty-five participants self-identified as "somewhat involved" undergraduates. Of those 35, 21 indicated that their involvement influenced their career path, and 14 indicated that it did not. Of those who were "highly involved" as undergraduates, 13 responded; 12 indicated their involvement influenced their career path, and one indicated that it did not.

A similar significant association, X2 (1, N = 46) = 4.28, p =.039, was observed between level of graduate student involvement and influence of student experience on the decision to pursue a career path in higher education. Greater graduate involvement levels tended to associate with a higher likelihood of reporting an influence of graduate community engagement experiences on choosing a career path in higher education. Thirty participants self-reported as being "somewhat involved," 15 individuals stated that their involvement influenced

their career path, and 15 indicated that it did not. Of those who were "highly involved" as graduate students, 16 responded; 13 indicated their involvement influenced their career path, and three indicated that it did not.

Participants with higher levels of undergraduate community engagement experiences tended to be more likely to report an influence on their decision to pursue a position at their current institution. A significant association, X2(2, N = 80) =7.32, p = .026, was found between level of undergraduate student involvement in community engagement and a decision to pursue employment at their current institution. In contrast, participants with lower levels of student involvement were the most likely to indicate a change of influence. A change of influence was determined by categorizing participants as (a) individuals reporting influence of perception on initial job pursuit only, (b) individuals reporting consistent influences on pursuit and retention, and (c) individuals reporting an influence on retention only. A significant association, X2 (6, N = 80) = 13.67, p = .034, was observed between undergraduate involvement levels and change of influence.

No significant association was observed between position, race, age, or gender. In addition, no associations were evident between participants' undergraduate or graduate experiences and their desire to remain at their current institution. No significant associations were observed between graduate student experiences and decisions to pursue a position at an institution.

Limitations

A limitation of the current study is the reliance upon participant self-reporting and validity of responses. However, the results appear to support the assumption that the sample population likely perceived high levels of organizational support and, therefore, OST provided an appropriate framework for the study.

IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

The findings of the current study indicated that perceptions of organizational support for community engagement affected employment decisions of faculty and staff members who are motivated to participate in community engagement. In alignment with existing literature, institutional culture and infrastructure are critical influences on motivations to engage (Colbeck & Wharton-Michael, 2006; Furco & Holland, 2013; Jaeger & Thornton, 2006; Lewing & York, 2017; O'Meara, 2003; O'Meara, 2013). While the majority of existing literature supports the effect of the organization on faculty motivations, the results of the current study demonstrate that findings are consistent across faculty and staff employees.

In addition, findings support a perspective in which motivations to engage, and corresponding effects on employment decisions, were influenced by the degree to which professionals were involved in community engagement as students, specifically at the undergraduate level. While a significant association was observed between the influence of perception of support on employee retention regardless of undergraduate experience, an association between perceived level of support and initial desire to obtain employment was only observed with more highly engaged undergraduate experiences.

Individuals tend to adopt an innovation, such as community engagement, at different rates based on individual characteristics and experiences (Rogers, 1962). Based on adoption rates, individuals can often be categorized as innovators, early adopters, early majority, late majority, and laggards. Innovators and early adopters are the initial champions of an innovation or change process, early and late majority typically need evidence before adopting, and laggards are extremely skeptical and often adverse to change. Therefore, in alignment with the IEO model, undergraduate experi-

ence may serve as a significant moderator of an individual's rate of adoption of and commitment to community engagement.

Community engagement represents a counter-normative activity for many higher education professionals (Chism et al., 2013), and unfamiliarity can significantly weaken motivation to engage (Abes, Jackson, & Jones, 2002; Jacoby, 2015). Such a familiarity may, in part, stem from undergraduate experience. While professionals more familiar with community engagement due to undergraduate experience may possess a more immediate and pronounced affinity for community engagement, the results of this study also indicated the role of the institution in manifesting potentially latent motivations of individuals with lower levels of undergraduate engagement. Faculty and staff members may tend to become interested in community engagement after assuming positions at an institution. A development of value associated with community engagement may be most evident in individuals with very little or no prior experience with engagement. Thirty (34.5%) participants reported being "not involved" undergraduates in communityengagement courses, research, or activities. Of this group, 56.67% seemingly developed a sense of importance regarding their perception of organizational support for community engagement and their decision to remain, in comparison to 16.67% reporting both an initial influence of perception on their decision to accept and the continued effect of perception on their desire to remain. Through the theoretical lens of OST, these professionals may have observed an organizational value placed on community engagement by the institution, as evidenced by the nearly 100% rating of "supportive" or "very supportive." After becoming involved, their contributions were likely perceived as valued, which in turn led to increased engagement and obligation to support institutional goals.

Implications

Motivating students to become engaged professionals.

A key finding of the current study was the influence of the student experience on employment decisions. Student participation in community engagement positively correlated with a decision to pursue careers in higher education, to seek an employing institution that valued community engagement, and to remain at a supportive college or university. Institutionalization promotes the next generation of faculty and staff members committed to community engagement. Through the framework of IEO, student experiences serve as a powerful motivator to participate in community engagement as a faculty or staff member.

Institutionalizing community engagement at an institution that actively involves students, especially those from minority demographics typically underrepresented in higher education, presents longterm effects, as these engaged students become engaged professionals at other colleges and universities. The dispersive effect of student involvement has implications not only for the general promotion of community engagement across the field of higher education, but also for supporting faculty and staff diversity since motivations to engage are often associated with underrepresented demographics (O'Meara, 2013; Vogelgesang et al., 2010). Increasing student participation and leadership in community engagement, especially at the undergraduate level, may tap into these individual motivations to pursue roles as engaged higher education professionals.

Administrators and faculty are typically the two institutional constituencies emphasized in institutionalization processes. However, students are also significant contributors (Furco, 2009), and they should be viewed as more than passive recipients in the institutionalization process (Battistoni & Longo, 2011). Longo, Kiesa, and Battistoni (2016) advocated for the emphasis of student leadership in developing a "sustained, developmental curricular approach to civic engagement" (p. 209) that

rewards involvement through engagement-based scholarships, student-instructor roles, and other avenues that promote immersion. Specific strategies may include engaging student government executives on institutional committees related to community engagement, involving student leaders in the strategic planning process, establishing student teaching assistants for service-learning courses, and equipping students to develop and lead co-curricular engagement experiences.

Graduate-level education represents a significant, albeit often missed, socialization opportunity for promoting community engagement with future higher education professionals (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; O'Meara, 2008; Tierney, 1997). The findings of the current study supported this perspective. According to O'Meara (2008), "graduate education needs to be 'disrupted,' 're-created,' and 'renewed' to include community engagement as an attractive way of learning, knowing, and doing within disciplines" (p. 40). Such reimagining involves the critical examination of individual graduate programs by internal stakeholders (i.e., program faculty, students, and administrators) and related external constituencies (i.e., relevant agencies and community organizations). Approaching graduate education in this manner promotes the structural development of embedded, sustained, discipline-specific engagement through appropriate service-learning courses and community-based research opportunities. Furthermore, graduate education also provides a powerful socialization process for future professionals by establishing institutional value for engagement and a connection between students' academic disciplines and their communities.

Recruit through a community engagement platform.

The results of the current study indicated that professionals with highly engaged undergraduate experiences sought an employer that demonstrated value for community engagement. The findings align with the previous findings of Lewing and

York (2017) who also reported that individuals with higher levels of community engagement experience as undergraduates typically engaged more quickly and with less need for organizational assistance. Therefore, individuals with highly engaged undergraduate experiences can often represent innovators and early adopters. The identification of potential employees who can serve as early catalysts and expand the initial group of supporters may be most important for colleges and universities at the onset of an institutionalization process. Providing evidence of support (i.e., stipends and course releases for service-learning courses) in recruitment and hiring materials emphasizing the communityengagement-related aspects of position description and job duties can provide mechanisms for enticing more highly motivated candidates.

Establish perceptions of support through development and retention.

Intentionally recruiting professionals with community engagement experience can potentially provide a more immediate and pronounced effect on institutionalization efforts, but professionals with highly engaged backgrounds represented the minority of participants in the current study. Regardless of familiarity stemming from prior student experience, an association was observed between perceived level of organizational support for community and employees' desire to remain at the institution. More established efforts indicative of the quality-building stage of institutionalization (Furco, 2009) involved the investment of resources and engaged many of the innovators and early adopters in the process. Through Kotter's (1996) approach to change, which has been identified as an appropriate institutionalization framework (Furco & Holland, 2013; Lewing & Shehane, 2017), identifying and empowering innovators and early adopters are essential to building a substantial support base for change. At this point, placing administrative emphasis on recognizing and rewarding contributions through employee evaluation and review processes is critical to supporting not only the retention of initial supporters but also the increased engagement of the early and late majority that require evidence of value before acting.

Through the lens of OST, employees tend to gravitate toward tasks and activities that the organization values. Once individuals engage in these tasks and their contributions are perceived as appreciated, they are more likely to continue to engage and feel a sense of obligation to support the goals of the institution. Institutional leadership may promote service learning and community engagement due to the myriad positive outcomes associated with the practice, from improved student learning (Kuh, 2008) to increased fundraising (Cicero-Johns, 2016; Jacoby, 2015). However, employee departure is highly possible if professionals motivated to engage do not believe that that their contributions are rewarded through the evaluation process. Therefore, institutions may benefit from demonstrating support through process (i.e., stipends, courses releases, and tenure policies) and rhetoric (i.e., speeches, marketing, and planning).

Future Research

The current study provided an initial exploration into framing faculty participation in community engagement through OST. As previously stated, leveraging community engagement in efforts to secure a more engaged workforce may become a beneficial human resources strategy as the diversity of higher education professionals increases and demographics associated with pronounced motivations increase as well. Institutional support is often viewed as a limiting factor for participation in community engagement, and individuals choose whether to engage based on their perception of value. However, the results of this study, in conjunction with previous findings, posit that institutional support may become more associated with decision to remain or depart an organization. The exploration of influence on employment decisions and professional diversity represents a potential area for future research considering the shifts in the demographics of higher education professionals and the increased mobility of the generations entering the workforce.

The current study focused on engaged professionals. However, examinations of both engaged and unengaged professionals at institutions supportive of community engagement, such as institutions receiving the Carnegie Elective Classification for Community Engagement, may support an increased understanding of applying OST to existing work on faculty and staff motivations. Research in this area could also more deeply explore the influence of undergraduate experience on decisions to engage in supportive institutional environments.

Furthermore, regression analysis research including both supportive and unsupportive organizations could further identify what organizational characteristics and elements are most influential in positive perceptions of support. For example, while nearly all participants reported positive perceptions of institutional support for community engagement, a significant association was not observed between perception of support and the presence of a community engagement support structure or coordinating entity. Additional research could help identify what elements (i.e., support structure, evaluation and promotion systems, and strategic planning) produce the greatest influence on faculty and staff members' decisions to participate in community engagement.

CONCLUSION

The institutionalization of community engagement is most successful when it becomes an avenue to pursue larger organizational goals, such as retaining a quality and diverse workforce. Based on the findings of this study, institutionalization efforts that promote positive perceptions of organizational support for community engagement can support the recruitment, development,

and retention of engaged professionals. Engaged professionals instruct service-learning classes, promote community-based research agendas, and support co-curricular activities that support student success (Simonet, 2008) and engagement (Kuh, 2008); therefore, it is appropriate for administrations to support their contributions.

In alignment with OST, administrators seeking to sustain community engagement can garner employee involvement by articulating engagement as an organizational value and ensuring individual contributions are rewarded and celebrated. However, a supportive approach should extend beyond individuals currently employed by colleges and universities to include students as well. In addition to perceptions of organizational support, the current study also supported an IEO-based perspective by demonstrating that student experiences provide a significant influence on an individual's future decision to participate in community engagement as a faculty or staff member. Leveraging student leadership during institutionalization efforts can provide both immediate and long-term effects on the advancement of community engagement in higher education.

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