5-2014

Staff Perceptions of Work-Environment Factors Affecting Morale in Southeastern Registrar's Offices

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STAFF PERCEPTIONS OF WORK-ENVIRONMENT FACTORS AFFECTING MORALE IN SOUTHEASTERN REGISTRAR'S OFFICES

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Educational Leadership Doctoral Program
Western Kentucky University
Bowling Green, Kentucky

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Education

By
Rheanna Plemons

May 2014

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This dissertation is dedicated to three very special individuals, who are unable to read this publication. However, they have influenced my research greatly.

To my great-grandmother Jewel Turner. Your saved newspaper clippings of major events, stories, and love of history helped develop my keen interest in research. I still cherish the many books you gave me. This book is for you.

To my father Kenny Painter. Your sense of humor, volunteering spirit, and care for humanity are a part of me. My concern about the happiness of others, including coworkers and customers, is because of you.

To my son Caden Plemons. Though your words are few, your thoughts are endless. Your smiles and hugs bring delight to all. You have changed my life and opened my eyes to a brand new world. Despite our many challenges, my morale is always boosted when thinking about you.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My life is always so hectic and busy with my personal commitments, work responsibilities, and civic engagement that I am often asked how I am able to do it all. That answer is simple: I receive plenty of support and encouragement. I owe a great deal of gratitude to those who have helped me along the way.

I would like to express my gratitude to my advisor Dr. Janet Applin. Your professional and personal advice helped me through the writing process. I not only call you a colleague and advisor, but also a friend. In addition, I sincerely appreciate the time Dr. Brian Meredith and Dr. Karl Laves gave to serve on my dissertation committee. Your kindness and support will not be forgotten.

I would not have survived the doctoral program without Dr. Stephen Miller. You and ekstasis will always remain a fond memory of the doctoral program. Thank you for challenging me, while continuing to have faith in my success.

This research would not be possible, without the network I have established through the Kentucky Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers. I owe a special thank you to my colleagues throughout the state, who supported my research and offered words of encouragement.

My coworkers have been a source of never ending support for the duration of the program. Thanks, Cheryl, for encouraging me while listening to me talk about all of the interesting articles I read. Judy and Marleen, thank you for being my experts in the field for the study. You've listened to me vent, and you've made me laugh. Freida, you have been a great mentor. I will always appreciate the opportunity to work in our awesome office. I owe a special thank you to the staff who took time to participate in my study.

Finally, the completion of this publication is possible because of my family. I would not have started nor completed the program without each of you. Your support and encouragement has been unlimited. I want to thank my mom for setting the educational bar high, my husband for encouraging me every step of the way, and my grandmother for being by my side through it all - including this degree.

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Rheanna Plemons May 2014 156 pages
Directed by: Janet Applin, Karl Laves, and Brian Meredith

Educational Leadership Doctoral Program Western Kentucky University

Studies on morale are prevalent in industry, healthcare, and public educational systems. However, morale studies are limited within higher education and focusing on the support staff at universities. This qualitative study used focus groups to identify themes among support staff in selected Registrar's Offices in the Southeastern region of the United States. Institutions were chosen based on comparable enrollments and similar organizational structure. The researcher asked participants to discuss their perceptions on current morale levels in the office and how different work responsibilities affect morale. In addition, participants were asked to discuss motivators used by leaders and whether those motivators boost morale. Since the Office of the Registrar is key to the institution, the researcher also asked participants how the office's perceived morale affected the fulfillment of the office's mission.

CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

The Office of the Registrar is deeply intertwined with the core mission and strategic plan of a post-secondary institution. Traditionally, the office manages the academic records of all students and ensures compliance with federal regulations, manages the institution's course inventory, facilitates student registration in university course offerings, certifies the degrees awarded through the institution, articulates transfer work, oversees the degree audit process, directs the commencement ceremonies, and publishes the undergraduate catalog as well as providing other key functions for the university community. The registrar's office has the privilege of orchestrating the culminating experience in a graduate's life - the receipt of a diploma. The institution could not function or market success without the valuable contribution of staff who tirelessly ensure these key functions are performed and serve as gatekeepers for the policies established through the university curriculum processes and administrators.

Quann (1979) defined the registrar as one of the chief administrative officers of the university, who oversees registration, grade reporting, record keeping, transcripts, certification, and catalog preparation. These functions are crucial to the sustainability of the university. Because of the value of job functions, the staff should be overjoyed and feel their positions serve a purpose. However, morale can suffer among staff.

Organizational Structure

The organizational structure is key to the success of the office. In accordance with Darkenwald's (1979) study, conflict is least likely to occur when an organizational structure is documented with a clear dominant party and a clear subordinate. Quann (1979) suggested an organizational structure in which the registrar reports to a vice-president or provost. The registrar should have an associate and/or assistant registrar providing leadership to independent areas within the office, such as publications, transcripts, registration and records, and classroom/master scheduling. Clearly, the best organization in the Office of the Registrar is to have groups of workers assigned to specific areas and reporting to associate- or assistant-level registrars. Preinkert (2005) emphasized that a registrar must be surrounded with "a group of assistants with the initiative and constructive ability, with whom they are able to share responsibility" (p. 9). Also, Preinkert suggested that a registrar's office should be filled with many administrators or professional staff and few clerks or office associates. The staff working in the office, under the director and mid-director level, must maintain high productivity to meet the needs of the students, faculty, and other staff members.

The Evolving Office of the Registrar

While the role of the Office of the Registrar has not changed over the years, the internal workings have evolved from a manual to automated process in many institutions. Automated processes have eased the traditional workload of handwriting or typing grades, calculating various grade point averages, and generating class lists; the need for attention to detail among staff members has continued to be a necessity because of the data analysis all staff members perform at some level. Pace (2011) conducted an informal qualitative study among registrars at public and private institutions to obtain perceptions on how each would restructure the office to meet evolutionary needs, if allowed to start over with a blank slate and unlimited funds. The common theme that emerged from staff qualifications included a baccalaureate degree, interpersonal skills, and technological skills. A technology savvy staff would propel the department from being “mere processors to becoming analysts” (p. 5). In addition, registrars expressed the need for cross-training within the office and division of enrollment management to break down barriers between the traditional divisions within the office (i.e., records, graduation, registration, etc.) and force collaboration. Rather than focusing on customer service from a student perspective, these registrars now believe staff members should serve on university committees and work along with faculty members in an effort to become proactive to change.

The Problem

When morale falters in the Office of the Registrar, management can expect high quality work to diminish and negative attitudes among staff members working information kiosks which are the first point of contact for potential and continuing students. Furthermore, management can expect voluntary turnover from unhappy employees, which can be detrimental. Continuity of a mature, knowledgeable, technically savvy staff is key to helping the university fulfill the office mission. The Office of the Registrar has been a necessity in an institution of higher education since the Middle Ages; however, limited empirical research is found when reviewing professional literature. Research is nonexistent concerning the morale among the staff members who record transfer work, fulfill transcript requests, post degrees, and perform other necessary data analysis tasks essential to the mission of the university.

Preinkert (2005) stated, “Continuity of employment is more important in the registrar’s office than in most other offices in the institution, especially in the key positions” (p. 9). Quann (1979) noted that the registrar has “major duties and tasks to perform that cannot be delayed or tabled” (p. 128). Fifolt (2010) conducted a qualitative study using three focus groups comprised of student service personnel who serve as students' first point of contact with the university. The study showed that staff members understood they were considered the "face of the university" (p. 62). In addition, the staff admitted their interactions with students, prospective students, and parents shaped the customer's impression of the office and its services. With this in mind, the Office of the Registrar must operate by demonstrating peak performance and providing high quality customer service. Turnover rates should be at a minimum while meeting the needs of employees who complete routine, mundane tasks and desire praise. Accuracy is paramount in working with students' records and posting credentials awarded through institutions of higher education. Blaney (2009) reported that office accuracy is directly related to student persistence or retention in higher education. However, morale studies are lacking concerning staff members working in higher education.

Darkenwald (1979) studied organizational conflict between colleges and universities, primarily at the level of conflict between departments and administrative offices. Analyzing conflict is important in higher education. Tjosvold, Dann, and Wong's (1992) research emphasized that the appropriate management of conflict is crucial to ensure the office continues to meet its objective, as the method of addressing directly relates to the outcome and the customer service provided. Results of Darkenwald's study indicated that faculty members are less likely to suffer from conflict because the department head serves as a buffer between them and the administrative offices. In addition, results showed that conflict is less likely to occur when the department or the administrative offices are deemed as dominant; one must be a clear subordinate to the other. Failure to clearly define these roles leads to a power struggle and conflict.

Bryson (2004) conducted a survey in the United Kingdom to determine causes for low morale among research and teaching faculty. Results identified trends research that included: decreased pay, lack of advancement opportunities, undefined job roles, work overload, fear of losing position, individualized work environment, failure to see vision, and leadership. The highest priority among all faculty was family and relationships outside of work. Heavy workloads prevented time with from family and affected morale. In addition, lack of opportunity to advance was a prominent factor impacting morale. The study indicated a slower decline in morale, and had obvious limitations, including the educational systems in the United Kingdom. The results cannot be generalized to institutions in the United States, since the structure may not be similar. As changes have occurred in UK's higher education system, the survey should be revisited to determine if morale is improving in the identified areas.

Rosser (2004) investigated the professional and institutional work life of mid-level leaders in higher education to determine the impact on morale, satisfaction, and plans for turnover. The study included 4,000 mid-level managers from private and public institutions, with the inclusion of directors within enrollment management. The study showed that ethnic minority leaders were likely to have lower morale and normal job satisfaction, but were more likely to leave the profession. The highest paid mid-level leaders had the lower morale, but they expressed satisfaction with the organization; therefore, they were less likely to leave their position. Professional development was very important to mid-level leaders and boosted morale; working conditions did not affect satisfaction, morale, or intent to leave. Interestingly, the satisfaction of mid-level leaders did not relate to the morale level of those leaders. However, those midlevel leaders with high satisfaction and low morale were more likely to leave the position. The study is limited because it did not address personal factors that could affect morale, such as family, health, etc.

Ngambi (2011) conducted a study on staff morale at the University of South Africa. Budget cuts, changes in technology, mergers, new leadership, calls for more research, and demands for increased graduation rates were cited as reasons for lowered morale. Survey results revealed dissatisfaction among staff members concerning coworkers' morale, salaries, fair distribution of workloads, pay matching responsibilities, and professionalism. External factors were shown to affect morale; these included parking spaces, poor work environment, and salary. Mid-level managers were unable to solve these issues without input from higher level leadership. Internal issues also affected morale; staff indicated they preferred to work in an environment where mentoring, teamwork, and succession planning was prevalent. The findings indicated that staff morale was affected by leadership in mid-level higher positions. The study was limited to the University of South Africa, where economic levels and the educational system vary from the United States. Further research could investigate a specific office in higher education over several universities to determine whether the same morale issues arise in different cultures. This is of particular interest in offices providing frontline support for students who may make recruitment or retention decisions based on the quality of customer service received within those offices. If leadership morale is low, the staff may suffer from low morale as well.

Kezar (2005) used a qualitative, grounded theory approach to study the influence of radical change in higher education. The researcher conducted interviews, observations, and a document analysis to review higher education governmental change. A thematic analysis resulted in negative consequences associated with radical change, which is characterized as many changes to existing organizational structures or policies in a short amount of time. The researcher concluded that radical change has negative consequences; whereas, positive consequences result from gradual change. Gradual change is characterized as evolving changes over a longer period of time. Cultural implication showed structure was needed for employees to possess high morale and to feel secure. Radical change is a cultural shock to employees and leads to low morale. Leaders in higher education, who value high morale of employees because of its link to optimal customer service, should be aware of how change impacts staff in offices offering frontline services.

Despite the link between morale, quality work, and customer service, research is limited in student support services. Quantitative and qualitative studies have been used to gauge morale and its impact, and have focused on mid-level directors, high-level administrators, and faculty. Further studies are needed to examine the morale of staff members falling under mid-level directors. Staff members in offices that provide services for students, faculty, other university staff, and the community must maintain high morale to provide quality customer service. Therefore, leaders must understand motivators perceived by staff members that boost morale and recognize job functions that cause morale to falter. A researcher could use emerging themes from previous research to conduct a survey, interview, or hold focus groups among staff members to determine whether the same themes emerge. Retention of students and graduation rates are paramount in higher education. Offices providing key services to retain and graduate students should be closely monitored to ensure the highest levels of productivity. In a key office, such as the Office of the Registrar, staff members should be consulted to determine job responsibilities, motivators, and leadership styles resulting in high or low morale.

Purpose

With the emergence of these themes in morale research, this study will integrate staff perceptions on how to identify low or high morale, the relationship of routine job functions and morale, the impact of leadership styles and motivators on morale, and how office demographics affect morale within the Registrar's Office in the Southeastern region of the United States. These institutions will have similar organizational structure, undergraduate student enrollment, and job responsibilities. In order to tie these themes together, an analysis will be conducted on the results collected from focus groups held on the campus of these institutions, with a focus on the perceptions of staff members concerning office morale. Selected staff members will serve as informants and provide their perceptions on determining the morale of coworkers through behaviors, along with work-related functions, leadership strategies, motivators, and demographic factors affecting morale. In addition, staff members will be asked to describe their perceptions on the effect of their morale on their office mission involving customer service. The mission should be instilled in the employees, because each plays a vital role in the fulfillment of the mission. Kerlin (2012) elaborated on this thought in a commentary on leadership within an enrollment management office. Kerlin emphasizes that all employees should be cognizant of their value and expected to produce high quality work: “It all has meaning, and it all matters” (p. 41).

Riehl (2009) noted in a leadership commentary that staff members possess the power “to make their boss a success or a failure” (p. 46). The Office of the Registrar must be successful because of the impact of its failure on the university. While the link between customer service and morale has been well documented in businesses, research is limited regarding higher education, specifically in the registrar’s office. Staff must maintain a high morale to ensure the effectiveness of the office toward the fulfillment of the mission and providing quality customer service. This leads to the central research question for this study: How do registrar’s office staff perceive the conditions of their work environment as related to morale?

Research Questions

In this study, the researcher hypothesize that non-management level staff in Southeastern registrar’s offices will perceive that leadership styles and motivators, office relationships, job functions, and demographics affect morale and hinder the members from fulfilling the mission of the office. The staff members will discuss their perception of the current level of morale in the office and perceived motivators. They will be asked to speculate on whether commonly used motivators such as monetary awards, alternate work schedules, and encouraging office collegiality activities actually boost morale. Since the selected institutions have similar organizational structure and institutional responsibilities, staff members will be questioned on their perception about which workplace tasks lead to low morale. Selected focus group participants will elaborate on strategies such as teamwork, empowerment, or praise used by current managers to foster high morale, and they will be provided with an opportunity to share other strategies they perceive to be effective. The staff members will then discuss how the perceived levels of office morale affect retention, graduation rates, job completion, and customer service. The focus groups will be selected based on a background questionnaire to help address how demographic factors such as age, educational level, and years of service relate to office morale. Empirical research questions are specifically stated in Chapter III.

Significance of Study

Studies are limited within enrollment management of higher education. While morale has been studied extensively, morale studies within enrollment management are nonexistent. The key areas of enrollment management include admissions, financial aid, advising, and the registrar's office. These offices play a significant role in the recruitment, retention, and graduation of students from the institution. The Office of the Registrar maintains the records of all students attending the institution, manages the course inventory, certifies degrees and other credentials, and serves as gatekeepers for university policies and curriculum updates.

This study is significant for management level staff in the Office of the Registrar to determine the job responsibilities that tend to cause low morale in the office and to determine effective motivators to boost morale. In public higher education systems, budget cuts mean raises are nonexistent. This study provides an opportunity for staff to discuss incentives, excluding money, which they perceive would boost morale. Money is excluded, as raises are limited in the current economy. Also, staff will discuss how they perceive that leadership strategies affect morale levels. Those in management positions can use these suggestions to change leadership strategies and motivators within the office and possibly assist in improving the university's student retention rate by improving accuracy within the office.

Bennis and Nanus (2007) suggested closing the commitment gap in order to motivate employees. The vision and mission of the office should be discussed as a means to motivate employees in helping the institution meet the goals of its strategic plan. This study will show that the non-management level staff perceive their morale relates to the fulfillment of the office mission. Management should recognize the importance of ensuring high morale within the office as the mission is significant to the sustainability of the institution.

Summary

The Registrar's Office is key to the mission of a university. Through the creation and maintenance of a registration system, the Office of the Registrar connects students with faculty. The staff provide customer service for university administrators, faculty, students, other staff members, and potential employers of students. The office manages the curriculum that is approved by the faculty and Provost and communicates the undergraduate university and departmental degree requirements through publications, websites, and automated degree audit. Therefore, exemplary customer service will ensure productivity and quality performance.

This study will focus on the perceived relationships between leadership strategies, motivators, job functions, and demographics. Research has shown that low morale can lead to high turnover rates and inaccuracy. This low morale may be a derivative of micromanagement, psychological contract violations, poor teamwork, demographics, and other leadership related issues. However, research is scant on morale perceptions among non-management staff in the Office of the Registrar. The goal of this study is to assist management in the Office of the Registrar in developing a leadership style, list of motivators, and job functions that cause low morale to ensure the office fulfills its mission. Focus groups for this qualitative study will be conducted state regional registrar's offices in the Southeastern region of the United States. A background questionnaire will be used to screen potential focus group participants and ensure a diverse group is represented. The study is limited to regional registrar's offices in the Southeastern region and excludes large state universities. Focus groups from the qualitative study consist of small samples and will be used to create generalizations. The goal of this research will be to answer the central research question: How do registrar's office staff perceive the conditions of their work environment as related to morale?

CHAPTER II: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Efficiency and productivity are the basis for keeping morale high in the workplace. The tasks people will complete are startling when morale is high. The most alarming example is pulled from World War II; Hitler had a conceptual understanding of morale and strived to keep his troops and workers efficient and productive in carrying out his mission. Disability Rights Advocates (2001) reported that Hitler wanted to keep hospital staff spirits high because of the gruesome tasks they were ordered to complete. To do this, hospital administrators frequently touted the benefits of the hospital's killing program and praised the hard work of employees. Lavish parties were thrown to mark milestones in the extermination process in an effort to keep workers focused on the perks of the job; the parties also were utilized to praise the employees for their efficiency in completing their tasks to serve the country. Hitler's reason for boosting morale was abysmal; however, the premise of this example is evident. Employees will work efficiently to fulfill the organization's mission when appropriately awarded. Praise has a powerful influence on employees.

Peterson, Park, and Sweeney (2008) developed dimensions of morale based on an analysis of literature. These dimensions include confidence, enthusiasm, optimism, capability, resilience, leadership, mutual trust and respect, loyalty, social cohesion, common purpose, devotion, sacrifice, compelling group history, honor, and moral rightness. Peterson et al. mentioned the lack of morale research, due to the study of larger issues. On occasion, morale will play a minimal role in research, while the larger issue is examined in more detail.

The following will provide an overview of the literature focusing on (1) morale in general such as identifying the signs of low and high morale, dealing with conflict, communication, turnover, leadership styles and motivators, the impact of mundane office routines and demographics; (2) morale studies focusing on areas outside of higher education; (3) morale studies in higher education; and (4) the conceptual framework.

Morale in the Workplace

Postsecondary institutions are not considered an industry; however, many of the same ailments facing industries apply in these tough economic times. Raises in higher education are virtually nonexistent due to the budget deficits at the state level. Gellerman (1963) chronicled The Pittsburg Studies, qualitative research conducted in 1922 on accountants and engineers to determine motivators to boost morale and hygienic factors used to sustain morale. The study indicated that pay, working conditions, and job security were hygienic factors that sustained morale; however, the factors did not boost morale. Office morale can be boosted without distributing monetary awards. The same study found that money did not boost morale; employees wanted freedom to make decisions and control of their work. Similarly, Weiss (2001) encouraged empowerment of employees to make decisions regarding work. Low morale is contagious among other employees. Therefore, supervisors must pinpoint the epicenter of insecure morale and combat the issues before contagion occurs. When morale starts to falter in the workplace, the cause must be quickly identified and resolved. Time, place, and people affect morale (Meyer, Macmillan, & Northfield, 2009). Therefore, these factors must be considered when seeking to boost office morale.

Identifying the Signs of Low or High Morale

Supervisors must learn to recognize the signs of low or high morale in the workplace. Employees with low morale will disengage from job responsibilities; whereas, employees with high morale will possess high job involvement. An office that is engaged has a sense of community among all the employees. Gellerman (1963) summarized the Harvard Studies, in which one analyzed group was shown to have low morale and low productivity; the comparable group had high morale and high productivity. The low morale group did not feel they belonged with the high morale group; they felt left out of the organizational successes. Maslow (1943) iterated that all humans, by nature, need to feel a sense of belonging, as was noted in the third level of his hierarchy of needs. Offices plagued with cubicles and supervisors who discourage discussion that is not work-related tended to experience lower morale. Sias and Cahill (1998) documented that employees turn to office friends to express frustrations with supervisors and to cope with unwanted change. In addition, employees socialize with others who share similar life experiences. Personal conflicts and home problems are virtually impossible to leave at home. Therefore, employees take comfort in consulting with a co-worker/friend. Sias and Cahill stated that this type of relationship may lead to extra-organizational socializing, with coworkers developing closer relationships and beginning to socialize outside of the office. Finally, employees who are reserved, keep to themselves, and feel they do not belong to the office community may suffer from low morale.

Turnover Rates

To ensure that high quality service is provided with little disruption in implementing university policies, the Office of the Registrar must have a continuity of knowledgeable, technology savvy staff. Dike (2012) emphasized that employees who suffer from low morale are prone to higher turnover rates. However, employees with friendships within the office are more likely to remain. As part of a qualitative research study, Sias and Cahill (1998) interviewed an employee who stated that she was reluctant to leave her organization, despite the horrid work environment, because she would have to leave her closest friend, which supports the finding that employees with low morale do not always leave the negative work environment. While research is lacking on whether a low morale individual can bring down the morale of an entire group, Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, and Vohs (2001) concluded that humans respond to the negative more than to the positive.

Lee, Mitchell, Wise, and Fireman (1996) examined voluntary employee turnover, i.e., those who leave their positions willingly. Since this is an ongoing concern in today's aging workforce, the importance of understanding the reasons people leave employment is underlined by the shortage of motivated individuals to take the place of those making a mass exodus. In an attempt to increase an academic understanding of how and why employees (from other technical fields) voluntarily leave their jobs, a study of shocks to the system, decision paths, and employee fit may be in order. When that question is answered, managers may be able to remove the catalyst and retain trained and dedicated individuals. Lee et al. conducted semi-structured interviews with nurses who were voluntary leaving their current position at a hospital. A follow-up survey was administered, and the data revealed some interesting interpretations of this study, which seemed very appropriate. The researchers suggested new ways to conceptualize the turnover process, which in today's economy, is an extremely important area for management. More technical jobs are available, with fewer qualified applicants. Therefore, the technical workforce should be retained. The results also showed that over half of the applicants voluntarily left a position because another had been procured. However, at least 45% of the nurses left their jobs without obtaining another position. Over half of the interviewees (58%) reported a shock, or major change, as affecting their decision to quit.

Conflict in the Workplace

Non-verbal observations may help determine morale. However, verbal observations, such as witnessing an office conflict, can demonstrate high or low morale as well. Conflicts are natural and inevitable in the workplace. Research by Tjosvold et al. (1992) emphasized the necessity of appropriate management of conflict, as the manner in which the conflict is addressed directly relates to the outcome and the customer service provided. Supervisors should be cautious of the type of communication used to resolve conflict; Baird and Bradley (1978) found that communication style and content clearly impacted morale.

Supervisors should learn to differentiate between the two categories of conflict found in a workplace, as outlined by Esquivel and Kleiner (1997). The first is C-Type. Employees involved in C-Type conflicts keep the office mission and goals in mind; e.g., C-Type conflict promotes creativity, open communication, and takes advantage of the employees' skills and talents. C-Type conflicts are less likely to cause morale to falter, because employees listen to each other and work together to resolve the issue.

A-Type conflicts are more likely to cause morale to falter. In A-Type conflicts, personal feelings or agendas dominate, causing lasting effects on the office, limited creativity, distrust among team members, and a hostile work environment. Employees lose sight of the mission or goal. Esquivel and Kleiner (1997) reported that A-Type conflicts cause loss of friendships and deterioration of office morale.

Supervisors must take a broader approach to resolving conflicts, particularly in the closely united work environments within enrollment management. Collaboration is necessary and required between the Office of the Registrar and Office of Admissions. Tjosvold et al. (1992) discussed conflict management between departments, as conflict and tension affect the institution's ability to deliver goods and services. When conflict is present and morale is low, these core offices can expect to find more errors in the admissions process and transfer articulation.

Employees deal with external personal conflicts that can cause low morale at work. When employees struggle with finding balance with outside responsibilities, supervisors are forced to understand and deal with role conflicts. Greenhaus and Beutell (as cited in Goff, Mount, & Jamison, 1990) identified work and family as potential role conflicts in which one role dominates, making participation difficult in the other roles. Employees can be expected to experience issues with ill children and finding childcare. Since many employees are working longer before retiring, supervisors also can expect issues with those who must care for elderly parents. These added responsibilities may cause stress on the person and department, creating an opportunity for low morale. While a popular belief is that employees should leave their troubles at the door, this belief is unreasonable and impossible.

Mundane Office Routines

Tasks within the Registrar's Office are routine and mundane. An employee who does not follow office rules is more likely to be noticed than one who follows the rules. Often supervisors do not take into consideration the employee with the highest accuracy rate on recording transfer work, or the employee who is always on time. Therefore, these employees may begin to feel underappreciated. Bell (2010) wrote that managers who focused too much time and effort on employees who make mistakes rob the organization of its "true human potential and distort[s] the managerial purpose and fracture[s] morale" (p. 9). Those in enrollment management leadership positions should recognize that employees may grow tired of the same routine that occurs daily, each semester, or annually. Not all employees truly want to work; instead, some must work to survive financially. Commencement, transfer articulation, issuing transcripts, and other events become mundane. Those in high level positions are commended for successful events, and those who volunteer are rewarded with meals and gratitude. Those who coordinate the event are expected to work without rewards. Unfortunately, gratitude is too often not expressed, as supervisors feel this work is simply part of the job. The end result is employees who dread working necessary institutional events or conferences. These experiences are necessary for office success; however, the employees who are present resent having to attend because of low morale.

Leadership Styles and Motivators

Micromanagement has been shown to decrease morale in an office. When management attempts to make all the decisions in the Office of the Registrar, employees feel unimportant and not trustworthy. Fracaro's 2007 article stated that the relationship between the micromanager and employee will be strained, and communication, creativity, productivity, flexibility, and trust will suffer. Porterfield (2003) noted that supervisors who practice micromanagement experience higher turnover rates. In addition, Porterfield reported that employment professionals list micromanagement as a top misery factor in the workplace; despite this, micromanagers rarely believe their employees are unhappy, unmotivated, and job searching. The performance of the office may remain acceptable; however, the staff is afraid and unable to make a decision without directly talking to the supervisor.

The long-term effects of micromanagement will wear on employees. Fracaro's (2007) observations illustrated that employees will cease to make sacrifices, which prevents the office from excelling in meeting performance goals. These employees recognize the lack of trust from the supervisor and become disengaged from others in the office. Over time, employees will cease to offer opinions or suggestions for improvements and will become complacent. Those who do not grow complacent will eventually become angered and leave.

Customers (alumni, students, faculty, and staff) become frustrated when employees cannot make a decision on behalf of their work area. When supervisors are absent, employees who are frequently micromanaged cannot provide a definite answer or solve a problem. Instead they must wait for the supervisor to return. Micromanagers cause a negative reflection on the office, as customers (students, faculty, and staff) cannot be assisted without the micromanager's input. Those who practice non-authoritarian leadership experience higher satisfaction ratings among employees (Baird & Bradley, 1978). Employees should be trained to answer questions and make decisions concerning their area of expertise and understand that they will have the support of their supervisor. Weiss (2001) emphasized that employees should have boundaries; however, they should feel empowered to make some decisions without managerial permission.

Baird and Bradley (1978) noted that supervisors who allow employees to work unsupervised and to organize independent plans to complete a task have a higher quality relationship. Supervisors should appreciate the work and learning styles of all employees, because some employees work best in a team environment, while others prefer to work independently, and still others work best when listening to music or process more information through doodling. Supervisors should use care in assuming that all employees fit the supervisor's perceived mold of excellence. Weiss (2001) suggested that supervisors empower employees to decide their work style, which, in return, will help to improve work performance.

A noted positive motivator is praise. Robison (2006) addressed the human need for praise among employees - humans crave more dopamine, a chemical that stimulates the brain's ability to process awards and recognition. When an individual experiences dopamine, more recognition is craved. Supervisors must remember to reinforce positive behaviors in the workplace. If not, employees will look to negative behaviors to gain attention. Praise can be delivered in office meetings, private discussions, through written communication, or verbally. Regardless of the medium, Robison emphasized that praise should match the personality of the employee. Those who are shy or do not enjoy public attention would not view public, verbal praise as a positive reward. Negative behaviors can be fostered when rewarding employees without taking into consideration preferences and personality types.

Praise should be administered only when warranted. According to Robison (2006), Employee of the Month programs often do not promote productivity, as the praise is expected and is frequent. Supervisors should familiarize themselves with employees and develop a praise system that facilitates productivity and recognition.

Employees need open communication to prevent perceived psychological contract violations. Caldwell (2011) surmised that organizational leaders who clearly define and honor psychological contracts are more likely to observe employees performing extra-role behaviors or taking on more responsibility. Addressing the possibility of psychological contract violations should take place during the interview process, and supervisors should be candid concerning job expectations, including those not formally advertised. This information may include working weekends without additional pay or complimentary time, loyalty to the office, required public service opportunities, advancement history of previous employees, and expected dedication to mission of the office.

Robinson and Rousseau (1994) described psychological contract violations as perceived promises not kept between an employer and the employee. Wilkens and Nermerich (2011) defined a psychological contract, to include expectations, perceived obligations for all parties, and the fulfillment of the obligations, including professional growth. In short, a psychological contract often contains unstated expectations on behalf of the employee and the hiring body. If one party fails to uphold the perceived obligations, such as a raise, promotion, or unpaid overtime, the psychological contract is broken. Individual differences and personalities should be taken into account when attempting to prevent psychological contract violations, rather than the use of a set management style for all employees (Suazo & Turnley, 2010). Khalid and Rehman (2011) developed a conceptual framework delineating a link between organizational change and psychological contract violations. The model indicated that organizational change can lead to psychological contract violations; however, the employee's job involvement rely heavily on whether effective or ineffective communication techniques were used to communicate the change. Ineffective communication promotes negative emotions, resulting in low job involvement; whereas, effective communication leads to positive emotions and high job involvement.

Stoner and Gallagher (2010) discussed psychological contract violations in terms of low and high job involvement. Using a quantitative approach, the researchers found a psychological contract violation was significantly related to a depressed mood at work and job involvement. The study showed a relationship between job involvement and turnover. According to the research, depressed mood at work and turnover rates increased among the employees as psychological contract violations increased. Those who reported high job involvement were less likely to leave the job, despite psychological contract violations. In addition, highly involved workers with leaders who had clearly defined expectations were more likely to exhibit extra-role behaviors, i.e., employees were willing to go beyond minimal expectations to meet the office goals (Caldwell, 2011).

Open communication fosters a positive relationship between supervisors and their employees. Farrant (1990) noted that employees appreciate supervisors who will listen to personal conflicts; however, they do not want to receive advice or be told what to do. Supervisors may find a personal connection with employees; however, giving inaccurate advice or interfering with family dynamics is not the goal of open communication. Rather, open communication helps employees build trust and relieve tension.

The Effects of Demographics

Aging employees are becoming more prevalent in the workplace. "Baby Boomers" are finding retirement difficult or simply prefer to remain at work. However, this group of employees can present challenges to leaders who are striving to motivate employees and remain current in an ever-changing technological world. Successful managers must provide leadership to all employees without discriminating against age; therefore, they must be prepared to address the common misconceptions associated with hiring and continuing to employ aging staff members. According to Rappaport, Bancroft and Okum (2003), aging employees may cause leaders significant implications, including the following: capture of intellectual capital in older workers and the transition of power to younger workers; limited supply and high demand for skill sets; changing workplace priorities; integration of senior and newer workforces; resentment from younger workers who see older workers as blocking careers or advancement opportunities; low morale among older employees who are unable to retire; retirement plans that are at inopportune times within the organization; and salary variations between new and older employees.

Reed, Doty, and May (2005) discovered a negative relationship between age and computer performance. The researchers documented prior studies that found aging employees may have decreased spatial or speed abilities which impact word processing or data retrieval. In addition, computers demand high visual acuity and reaction time. Deterioration of memory occurs naturally over time; therefore, aging employees may suffer from declining memory. This decline can deter the completion workplace goals. Leadership can look to gerontology research to discover strategies to foster memory and recall abilities. Reed et al. also encouraged leaders, who have goals regarding technological change and aging employees, to understand that those workers may present themselves as unable to grasp new technological skills. The aging employee is simply adverse to change. Opinions toward technological changes are typically based on whether the individual perceives the change as an advantage or a threat. Research also has shown that, while older employees possess the ability to gain new technology skills, they worry about not gaining the skills and losing their job. This, of course, leads to tension in the workplace.

Leaders must be cautious to not stereotype aging employees when offering technological professional development opportunities. Reed et al. (2005) stated that leaders should promote "effective learning of all employees" (p. 225). Beatty and Burroughs (1999) theorized that, as workers age, they tend to receive less training and professional development; whereas, younger workers are given more opportunities to grow. In addition, leaders should provide positive reinforcement for aging employees. In the Reed et al. research (2005), aging employees were able to acquire new technological skills, if they possessed a positive belief about their current technological abilities.

Beatty and Burroughs (1999) discussed the experience and stability brought to the workplace by aging employees. Research has found that workers over 50 are more interested in “upgrading current job skills and less emphasis on job mobility” (p. 600). The researchers also encouraged leaders not to assume that older employers will require more time from work. Statistics illustrate that rates for absenteeism and lost work time are equal for younger and older employees. However, leaders should take into consideration the challenges facing all workers. Younger employees tend to have children who get sick or have many activities at school. Older employees may have outside responsibilities as well, such as taking care of parents or other family members. An effective leader will brainstorm strategies to accommodate both younger and older workers. One method to help both groups is to consider offering flexible work schedules on a voluntary basis. Such accommodations cause the leader to appear “family-friendly” (p. 599). The researchers emphasized that flexible schedules are “an attractive benefit for employees at many different stages of their personal and professional lives” (p. 599). Losing older workers can be detrimental to an organization that needs the experience to prevent lapses in office responsibilities. Rappaport et al. (2003) encouraged leaders to explore flexible work arrangements to retain aging employees who possess the most experience. Rather than taking retirement and working full time, the flexible schedule encourages employees to remain and work different hours or a shorter schedule.

Leaders must prepare for transitions between younger and older employees. Older individuals are nearing retirement, and at some point, will leave the workforce and be replaced. Leadership can affect the transition, depending upon the strategies used prior to the retirement. A leader should want younger employees to gain the experience and loyalty from those who are aging. To assist in this, Rappaport et al. (2003) suggested pairing experienced and less experienced workers to complete a task. Also, a mentoring program can be provided for younger employees to gain experience from older workers. Newer employees should be encouraged to work on projects typically organized by their older counterparts to ensure others in the office know the process needed to complete a task.

Ergonomics play an important role in satisfying aging workers and meeting the needs of the organization. Perry (n.d.) suggested evaluating the physical, physiological, and psychosocial changes of employees. Physical changes may include strength, flexibility, balance, sight, reaction time and speed, hearing, dexterity, and body fat. Physiological changes include oxygen exchange, respiratory system, cardiovascular system, blood pressure, fatigue, and extreme temperatures. Psychosocial changes include shift preferences, training and learning, and disenfranchisement and disengagement. Leaders should review at each change and identify the physical, physiological, and psychological demands, capabilities, and mismatches between the demand and capabilities. Finally, the leader should strive to minimize the mismatches through education, training, redesigning the workplace, or equipment.

Morale Studies Outside of Higher Education

Researchers have studied morale within industries and its relationship with productivity. Gellerman (1963) summarized Elton Mayo's 1927 study, in which the findings resulted in a theory that employees cluster into informal groups to fill voids in their lives. These relationships provided more motivation than money, discipline, or job security. This finding changed the face of organizational leadership to promote listening, cooperation, and understanding when dealing with subordinates. Mayo also introduced the concept of micromanagement, when he found that employees' productivity increased when given the opportunity to manage their work. Social interaction was a necessity for blue collar workers who toil long hours in front of machinery. As a result of Mayo's studies, organizational researchers have continued the examination of motivating employees and boosting morale.

Goff et al. (1990) distributed a survey to 952 employees in an electronic and communications firm who had children up to 5 years old. Of those employees, 175 utilized the childcare center. The survey was developed to specifically investigate employee absenteeism, work/family conflict, primary responsibility for childcare, availability of care for sick children, satisfaction of childcare arrangements, supervisor support, and number of children for which the employee was responsible. As previously mentioned, work and family conflict affects morale at work. In the Goff et al. study, the survey results found that childcare at work did not reduce employee absenteeism nor did it reduce work/family conflict. However, the study found that supervisor support reduced work/family conflict, i.e., the supervisor was supportive of the employee's family dynamics and situations. Further analysis showed that, while flexibility and accommodations made by the supervisor eased work/family conflict, absenteeism increased.

Organizational politics within industry impact employee morale. Dhar (2011) completed a qualitative study using a phenomenological approach on 26 employees working in three automobile manufacturing companies. Each completed semi-structured interviews to provide data concerning how employees cope with organizational politics. The results indicated organizational politics were viewed as "evil and is negatively affecting the morale of the employees" (p. 158). Dhar discussed the link between perceived organizational politics and job performance and turnover. The perceptions of organizational politics were directly related to the employees' attitudes and behaviors. The study also showed that, although the employees detested organizational politics, they were involved to survive the work environment.

Theorists have linked high performance work systems with high involvement and commitment to work; however, Atkinson and Hall (2011) focused on the happiness and attitude of employees within a high performance work system. The study focused on the workers of the National Health Service (NHS) Acute Trust of England and Wales. Within the evaluated work system, employees were offered flexibility to control work time, to include working part time, taking career breaks, sabbaticals, etc. The primary goal of offering such flexibility was to allow individuals to find a healthy balance between their commitment to work and their personal life. The researchers stressed that human resource (HR) standards, while successful, have neglected to take into consideration the impact on employees' attitudes in the workplace. An exploratory case study was conducted using an inductive approach to determine the links between flexible work schedules and worker satisfaction and to analyze the work environment; the researchers sought to prove that happiness was related to worker discretion, i.e., meaning a cheerful worker goes beyond the contractual agreements of the job. The case study was conducted at the NHS Acute Trust, with a sampling of 43 participants using semi-structured interviews. The volunteer participants were selected by liaisons working within each department and were pulled from managerial and staff positions. The background data indicated that the participants were derived from male and female employees, various age groups and departments, and various work-involvement levels.

The information was analyzed using a thematic analysis, which showed that flexible work schedules tend to please workers; thus, a link was established between happiness, chosen workplace behaviors, and performance outcomes. However, other attitudes, such as commitment to work, job satisfaction, and involvement, were not affected by flexible work scheduling. Employees admitted happiness was related to discretionary behavior at work, in that employees when happy were willing to go beyond the contractual agreements of the job to provide better customer service. Participants also identified what they perceived to be the desired outcomes of the flexible work scheduling opportunities offered by their employer. These perceived outcomes were improved recruitment, retention, employee performance, and reduced absence. Other individuals mentioned their willingness to participate in teamwork when allowed to work a flexible schedule; both teamwork and flexible schedules were linked to happiness. Two participants commented on the relationship between flexible work schedules and reduced absences, noting that stress from overwork and personal issues led to illness. These findings were linked to the theoretical framework derived from the literature.

Morale has been of particular interest in public educational systems because of its link to student success. Meyer et al. (2009) studied the impact of principal succession on teacher morale. The researchers defined morale as the "emotional attributes such as satisfaction, enthusiasm, and demeanor" (p. 173). To conduct the qualitative study, the researchers focused on secondary and middle schools in Nova Scotia that had experienced multiple principal successions in a specific range of time. The interviews were framed around two concepts: the changes in school culture subsequent to hiring the new principal, and the changes in teacher morale. Their results showed experienced teachers were least likely to suffer from low morale because of principal succession; these teachers continued with their classes without adapting to cultural changes. Younger, more inexperienced teachers were more likely to have low morale from the changes. During the transition of principals, informal leaders emerged in the interim. After the establishment of a principal, the teachers continued to look to these informal leaders, who were fellow teachers.

Higher Education and Morale

Studies focusing on morale in higher education are centered on administrators, faculty, and students. The need for studies among support staff is evident in higher education research, as the staff typically is the first point of contact for students entering the institution. Robbins (2003) reported that morale among faculty and staff in higher education has dropped due to budget cuts, which lead to staff reduction, increased enrollments, and program cuts. Robbins' article focused on motivating employees through open communication, confronting problem behaviors, promoting more collegiality between internal divisions, allowing flexibility, and professional development studies on morale in the Office of the Registrar are nonexistent; however, the research that was focused on morale and higher education produced interesting outcomes.

The relationship between departments and administrative offices can become somewhat tentative, as administrators enforce policies among faculty members. Darkenwald (1979) investigated the relationship between the degree of institutional differentiation and conflict between departmental and administrative subsystems in colleges and universities. The research examined decision-making conflict between members of professional and bureaucratic systems in colleges and universities. The rationale for this study lay in researching whether conflict was related to differences in organizational characteristics of the institutions, with the goal of examining organizational differences to determine whether some organizations experienced more conflict than others. Darkenwald hypothesized that department heads at medium-differentiated institutions experienced a greater degree of conflict with the central administration in reaching decisions that affect the department than experienced by department heads at high- or low-differentiated institutions. Through a mailed questionnaire to 350 department heads from 10 randomly selected institutions, the study utilized a decision-making conflict scale to gather data concerning conflict experienced by department heads. The study revealed that department heads at medium-differentiated institutions experienced the greatest conflict with administrators, and concluded that both types of institutions experienced tension between faculty and administrative authority. When a dominant party is clearly identified, whether an administrator or a department, internal conflict was relatively low. However, where a clear subordinate was not identified, power struggles were common and conflict was inevitable.

Bryson (2004) conducted a study on morale and faculty satisfaction in the United Kingdom. The underlying rationale was also to examine the move from an elite educational system to one for the masses. As enrollment grew with students possessing a vast range of backgrounds and skills, faculty members found themselves with larger classes. Bryson hypothesized that higher education was evolving into a commodity based on the public's wishes. Participants were asked to reflect on current and past faculty positions using a survey covering a broad range of details, including employment conditions, relationships, career history and aspirations, opportunity equality, security and contractual status, voluntary exit and destination, key issues, employment situation, and personal context and demographics. The research method involved mixed methods and a survey over 240 open-ended questions that were structured to encourage the respondent to reflect on their past and present situations.   The researchers concluded that approximately half of the academic workforce thought the academic occupation was an attractive job opportunity; however, the other participants were merely coping. Strong indications evidenced that faculty reacted negatively to change. Traditional and conservative approaches were found to be valued and deemed attractive to new faculty.

Rosser (2004) examined mid-level leaders in higher education in a national study. Mid-level leaders were described as a group whose contributions were rarely recognized. Despite this, the group must possess commitment, training, meeting educational standards, and adhere to the highest professional standards. Unfortunately, as their numbers have increased, turnover rates also have increased. This employment trend causes institutions to experience inefficiencies, instability, and increased training time. Leaders lack the visibility throughout the academy and have been of little concern to educational researchers at the national level. Since these individuals are often on the front lines for customer service, they can make or break a university's enrollment numbers. These mid-level professionals interact and participate with students, faculty members, and the public; and they can reflect the institution's overall spirit and vitality. Roser hypothesized that mid-level management's perceptions of work life, satisfaction, and morale were linked directly or indirectly to their intentions remain in, or leave, their position and suggested a multilevel theoretical model to prove this hypothesis. Using a quantitative approach, approximately 4,000 mid-level managers were randomly selected to participate in the survey. The findings indicated that individual perceptions of mid-level leaders' professional and institutional work life are powerful variables impacting on their satisfaction, morale, and turnover intentions. The results found that, in order to retain this essential group, institutions should provide support for professional activities and career development; recognize their skills, competence, and expertise; emphasize the importance of fostering positive relationships with faculty members, students, senior administrators, and the public; and minimize the effects of bureaucratic and political intervention.

Ngambi (2011) conducted a qualitative study at the University of South Africa on staff morale, identifying internal university factors that influenced morale. These included budget cuts, changes in technology, mergers, new leadership, increased demand for publications, and goals for higher graduation rates. Staff were unhappy with their coworkers' morale level, the distribution of workloads, insufficient salaries, and professionalism among coworkers. In addition, staff members identified external factors affecting morale, which included poor work environment and insufficient parking. Mid-level managers at the University of South Africa faced the same issues as those elsewhere in similar positions; they were unable to solve issues without the assistance of high-level administrators. To boost morale or prevent low morale from occurring, the staff admitted they preferred to work in a team-oriented environment that involved mentoring. They preferred leaders who practiced succession planning to assist in transitioning.

Cameron (1981) identified domains of organizational effectiveness among students, faculty, and administrators at 41 institutions of higher learning. The domains consisted of external adaptation, morale, academic-oriented, and extracurricular. The results were differentiated between scholarly-high morale, scholarly-medium morale, externally oriented, and mediocre group. The research revealed that institutions with a liberal arts focus, high tuition, high endowments, high state revenue for research, and high monetary allowances for academic support were likely to have scholarly-high morale. When institutions are provided with money and support, even with high tuition, students, faculty, and staff were highly pleased. Scholarly-medium morale groups also shared the same characteristics; however, they were not limited to liberal arts institutions and placed an emphasis on faculty development. Institutions with low scores in morale that were attempting to increase enrollment placed a high emphasis on fundraising, while promoting faculty development.

In a qualitative study founded on a grounded theory approach, Kezar (2005) conducted interviews, observations, and a document analysis to interpret the consequences of radical change in higher education using a thematic analysis. The basis of the research was on radical changes in the university governance. The themes reflected an association between radical change and negative consequences, as well as an association between gradual change and positive consequences. Structure was a common theme for high morale and security indicating that sudden shifts or radical changes to existing structures caused low morale and insecurity.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework for this research is based on grounded theory. As theories do not exist in the area of staff morale in higher education, this conceptual framework is the best fit for this qualitative study. Creswell (2013) suggested that grounded theory should be used as a conceptual framework when "a theory is not available to explain or understand a process" (p. 88). As shown, morale studies are prevalent in other areas, and some state models or theories; however, research is limited concerning staff in the Office of the Registrar. Therefore, Creswell affirmed that grounded theory is appropriate when existing models are "developed and tested on samples and populations other than those of interest to the qualitative researcher" (p. 88). Focus groups are practical, as founded in a grounded theory approach typically utilize interviews of at least 20 individuals. Although different from group interviews, focus groups allow a gathering of individuals to answer researcher designed questions. Using grounded theory, Glesne (2011) analyzed data for themes and patterns to formulate a theory in the field, suggesting the use of a theoretical sampling that pulls individuals from different areas or settings. This method helps to defend theories, because the research is spread among various individuals from different environments.

Summary

The research in this chapter focused on general factors shown to affect morale, studies on morale conducted outside of higher education, studies focusing on higher education that include morale, and grounded theory as a conceptual framework. Morale is linked to productivity and efficiency in the workplace, which is why leaders would desire employees with high morale. However, leaders often focus on current problems, such as poor customer service, without addressing the root of the problem. Studies also tend to focus students on larger issues, with morale as a minor component of the research. Because of this, few studies actually focus on morale in general. According to Gellerman (1963), although not using the term morale, Elton Mayo began the trend in connecting employees' feeling and attitudes with productivity and helped to lay the groundwork for organizational leadership with a more people-centered approach. The research links morale with customer service, turnover, conflict, and job satisfaction; therefore, the understanding of morale in the workplace is crucial when expecting employees to provide optimal services to customers.

Low morale can be a result of employee attitudes and perceptions within the office. Maslow (1943) found that humans need a sense of belonging. Therefore, in order to maintain high morale, leaders should promote collegiality among staff members and allow informal clusters of individuals to emerge within the office environment. Turnover can be a consequence of employee low morale. Lee et al. (1996) established shock as a reason for voluntary turnover in the position. In the Baumeister et al. (2001) study, the researchers surmised that bad is better than good; i.e., employees are more likely to remember negative occurrences in the workplace, or shocks, rather than positive experiences. Tjosvold et al. (1992) discussed the handling of conflict by leaders in the workplace and stressed its relationship with services rendered within the organization. The routine nature of office work also is a source of morale issues. Bell (2010) encouraged mangers to spend time focusing on the positive performance of employees, rather than taking notice only to reprimand poor performance. Praise is a powerful motivator, if the praise matches the individual (Robison, 2006). Lack of open communication can lead to psychological contract violations, which are associated with low morale (Wilkens & Nermerich, 2011). When workers feel the employer has not met contractual obligations, they are more likely to suffer from low morale. Aging employees also may suffer from low morale due to the inability to retire or to keep up with technological advancements in the work environment (Reed et al., 2005).

Studies on morale have been conducted in industry, healthcare organizations, and public educational systems. However, limited studies are available in higher education, as they rarely focus solely on morale, but rather, include a larger issue to be addressed. Darkenwald (1979) stated that conflicts can be expected when superiority is not established, either by a department or the administration. Feeling as though decisions are forced upon a department leads to low faculty morale. Bryson (2004) conducted a study in the United Kingdom that addressed faculty morale; however, the research was focused on how the faculty adjusted to the migration of a public university system. The new system increased class sizes and included students from various educational and socioeconomic backgrounds. Rosser (2004) examined mid-level leaders' intentions to remain at a university based on job satisfaction and involvement. Ngambi (2011) touched on general staff morale and identified the need for adequate parking and cohesion between coworkers. Cameron (1981) associated medium to high morale with higher education institutions that provided plenty of money and administrators who did not focus on increasing enrollment.

Research on morale in higher education does not fully take into consideration the role of front-line staff who work directly with new and continuing students. Therefore, additional studies are needed to form a theory on establishing that these individuals have high morale to ensure low turnover rates, a sense of belonging in the office and university, and positive relationships with leaders. The Office of the Registrar is an example of an office that works closely with students from the time of enrollment to graduation. The staff must possess knowledge of university policies and help students navigate higher education. Therefore, this office plays a role in the retention of students, while serving the entire campus and community. A qualitative, grounded theory approach is appropriate for this research, because morale studies have not been conducted on the Office of the Registrar as a particular sample group. Through thematic analysis and the use of focus groups to gather data, the researcher will construct a theory on the perceptions of morale among staff in selected registrar's offices in the Southeastern region.

CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

The Registrar's Office is key to the mission of a university. Through the creation and maintenance of a registration system, the Office of the Registrar connects students with faculty. The staff provide customer service for university administrators, faculty, students, other staff members, and potential employers of students. The office manages the curriculum approved by the faculty and Provost and communicates the undergraduate university and departmental degree requirements through publications, websites, and automated degree audit systems. Therefore, the staff members must provide exemplary customer service to ensure productivity and quality performance. Focus groups for this qualitative study originated from registrar's offices with similar organizational structures and institutional enrollments. This leads to the central research question for this study: How do registrar's office staff perceive the conditions of their work environment as related to morale?

Qualitative Research

Qualitative research allows an individual to gather complex and detailed information about an issue (Creswell, 2013), in that the researcher interacts with the participants, visits the work or home environment in which the participants work or live, and encourages individuals to tell their stories with little regard to established literature. Bogdan and Biklen (1992) suggested that qualitative research shares five distinct features; it is naturalistic, concerned with a process, uses descriptive data, is inductive, and has meaning. Creswell defined qualitative research as a "situated activity that locates the observer in the world" (p. 43). Bodgan and Biklen characterize the qualitative researcher as someone who wants to ensure perspectives are accurately captured. This form of literature is popular when research is limited on a particular topic and to allow particular groups to voice opinions and perspectives.

Glesne (2011) discussed the interpretivist paradigm where the research goal is to interpret the "social world from the perspective of those who are actors in that social world" (p. 8). Qualitative research provides an opportunity for participant engagement in the topic and leads to dynamic research strategies with data collection. The goal is to find more information on a social phenomenon from the groups that experience it. In addition, qualitative research can provide groundwork for further studies on specific research topics based in quantitative data.

Focus Groups

Focus groups are popular when conducting social and behavioral studies. However, the researcher must strive to differentiate a focus group from a group interview. The researcher serves as a moderator to keep the participants on track; however, the focus group session should be dynamic with fluid conversation. Because of this, Sagoe (2012) states focus groups are effective in gathering information concerning opinions and attitudes. Weiss (1998) stated that focus groups are "good at stimulating interaction and revealing the nature of public discourse and representation" (p. 260). In addition, these focus groups can be used to generate ideas for further research due to the interaction between participants. Sagoe pointed out idea generation is helpful in areas where research in a particular field is not prominent and hypotheses are not formally theorized. Smithson (2000) agreed with this sentiment, urging focus groups to be used in early stages of research fields. Sagoe asserted allowing participants to contribute as a group permits the researcher to "tap into the many different forms of communication that people use in day-to-day interactions" (p. 2). However, Smithson emphasized focus groups should be perceived as performances, because the moderator is playing a specific role along with the participants. This includes non-verbal cues evident during the focus group. The data gathered through observation can be included as a significant element of the study. This multidisciplinary approach allows the researcher to take the study to another level that embodies the dimensions of culture as outlined by Hall (1959).

Focus groups have limitations. Sagoe (2012) stated that focus groups may not be conducive to sensitive topics where participants might feel challenged about their beliefs. In addition, the moderator must control for situations where one person dominates the conversations. Because focus groups are often conducted in contained environments, the conversation may be stifled.

The Moderator's Role

In an interpretivist paradigm, the researcher is personally involved and possesses an emphatic understanding of the context (Glesne, 2011). In addition, the researcher must fulfill two roles: the individual who is focused on gathering data, and a learner who must listen and reflect on procedures and findings. The researcher's primary role is to serve as a focus group moderator. Sagoe (2012) emphasized the moderator should explicitly state answers are neither right nor wrong. Encouraging debate is helpful in obtaining honest opinions from participants. In addition, the moderator should guide the conversation and ensure it remains on track, and must ensure one person does not dominate the conversation and everyone in the focus group has a voice in the study. With this in mind, the moderator should not divulge personal opinions during the focus group session and must make statements concerning confidentiality and express gratitude to participants.

Scrutiny of Qualitative Research

Qualitative studies have long faced scrutiny because researchers fail to adequately demonstrate concise methodology, as in quantitative research. While quantitative researchers can graphically illustrate research questions, qualitative researchers must rely on painting a picture with words to portray the conceptual framework. Anfara, Brown, and Mangione (2009) discussed the challenges facing qualitative research in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility is a qualitative reference to internal validity prevalent in quantitative research. The authors encourage qualitative researchers to commit to longer times in the research field, debriefing, and triangulation as a means to create credibility. Transferability is linked to external validity and is encouraged through the use of purposive sampling rather than samples of convenience. Creswell (2013) commented on research among individuals who are worried that their supervisor may learn their opinions; thus, researchers should not focus on their own work area because of this concern. Other work environments outside the researcher's work environment will ensure the study is accurate. Dependability is similar to reliability and is best demonstrated in qualitative research through triangulation, peer examination, and documented audit trails. Finally, confirmability is a qualitative term similar to objectivity. Since qualitative research has been accused of bias, researchers should strive to triangulate data and exercise reflexibility, i.e., they are aware of their relationship within the study.

Sources of Data

The settings for the focus groups had to be convenient for those willing to participate in the study. Therefore, the researcher traveled to the involved institutions to collect data from focus group members. Since the groups consisted of 5-6 participants, a small meeting space sufficed. The group, including the moderator, met during work hours.

The institutions utilized for this study were selected based on similar organizational structures within the Office of the Registrar and comparable enrollments in the Southeastern region of the United States. The researcher initially contacted the registrar at each institution to get permission to conduct the study. The registrar was then given an email to forward to eligible participants, who held non-management level positions in the office.

Sample Selection

Sagoe (2012) emphasized that focus groups should maintain small sample sizes and be purposefully selected to meet the needs of the study. The researcher distributed the background questionnaire to approximately 60 staff members through the registrars at the selected regional institutions, who identified support staff members and directed them to contact the researcher to participate in the study. This recruitment method was based on Sagoe's suggestion to use membership lists and word of mouth to solicit focus group participants. In addition, Weiss (1998) suggested that focus groups were most successful when hierarchy was not factored into the participants.

The data collected was analyzed through the background questionnaire to ensure a diverse focus group was selected, taking into consideration age groups, educational backgrounds, years of experience, and morale levels. The goal was to establish five focus groups from each institution. From the background questionnaire, the researcher hoped to select four to eight focus group participants from the institutions, for a total of 20-40 participants in the qualitative study. However, obtaining participation from the desired number of individuals proved to be an unexpected challenge. Creswell (2013) acknowledged that soliciting participation can be a challenge. Some employees at another institution were concerned their supervisor would know who made negative comments, which is another challenge presented by Creswell. Three focus groups were established from three of the institutions. Adjustments were made to include a single participant from one institution, who was the sole volunteer from the institution. After speaking with a registrar at another institution, the researcher discovered the alarming number of new employees within the office could potentially skew the perspectives.

Instrument Development

Since research on morale in higher education focuses on faculty, students, or administrators, this study focused on staff within a core administrative office in higher education. The researcher conducted three focus groups, a semi-structured interview, and a background questionnaire to answer the central and following empirical research questions:

From the perspective of registrar's office staff:

RQ1: What is the level of morale in the office?

RQ2: To what extent are registrar's office work-related functions related to low morale?

RQ3: How do staff view work environment motivators in relation to morale:

a. Monetary Awards?
b. Alternative Work Schedules?
c. Relationships?

d. Other?

RQ4: What work environment leadership strategies promote high morale among office staff:

a. Teamwork?
b. Empowerment?
c. Praise?
d. Other?

RQ5: To what extent does morale create a barrier toward meeting the office mission?

a. Customer Service?
b. Retention?
c. Job Completion?

RQ6: To what extent do demographic factors relate to the questions above?

a. Gender?
b. Age?
c. Educational Level?
d. Years of Service in Office?

Research Questions 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5 will be answered through the focus groups conducted at each regional institution. These questions will gather the perceptions from the staff pertaining to office morale. Research Question 1 will address the perceived current morale level of the office, while research Question 2 will investigate work-related functions affecting morale. Since responsibilities are streamlined in the offices, Research Question 2 will explore which responsibilities within the office cause low morale.

Research Question 3 will explore staff perceptions on motivators to boost office morale; specifically, staff members will be asked how they perceive money, alternative work schedules, and positive working relationships in boosting morale. Research Question 4 will investigate how staff perceive that leadership strategies such as the promotion of teamwork, empowerment, and praise can affect morale. Research Question 5 will focus on the office mission and how staff perceive that morale can create a barrier in meeting retention rates, customer service standards, and job completion. The responses from Research Question 6 will be collected through a background questionnaire, collecting demographic information such as educational level, years of experience, and current level or morale to help analyze responses from various groups.

Interview Guide. The interview guide served as a directional tool used to keep the conversation on track during the focus groups. The questions specifically related to the empirical research questions on which this study is based and were designed to help participants engage in a dynamic conversation and share opinions about the state of morale in the office. Fowler (2009) stated that focus group questions should take into consideration the knowledge level of the participants before being crafted. The researcher consulted with registrars to ensure support staff had similar job responsibilities and asked the participants for their perceived level of morale in the office among coworkers. In addition, participants were asked to discuss busy and slow times in the office, as well as morale levels during those times. In an effort to identify perceived effective leadership strategies within the office, participants were asked to comment on motivators utilized by their supervisors to boost morale and whether those motivators were perceived to work. Participants responded to questions about the office's mission and how they perceived morale levels affect progress toward fulfilling the office's mission.

In an effort to produce a valid study, the interview guide was distributed to two experts in the field and an expert methodologist (see Expert Review of Instruments, Appendix A). Two associate registrars conducted the expert content review. Both have served in management level positions within the Office of the Registrar for over 20 years and have experienced low turnover rates during their tenure. Both reviewers participate in annual professional development sessions offered through their states association of collegiate registrars and admissions officers. When feasible, they have participated in regional and national professional development trainings geared toward professionals in the field. The expert methodologist review was a faculty member who is a qualitative research methodology instructor at Western Kentucky University.

Anfara et al. (2009) encouraged qualitative researchers to practice mapping interview or focus group questions to the central empirical research questions, as the questions are key to the success of the study and are not arbitrary. The map reveals the inner workings of the study, and the interview guide mapped to the empirical research questions is located in Appendix C.

Questionnaire. The background questionnaire was created to analyze data relating specifically to Research Question 6 and was used to ensure diverse participation in the focus group. The participants provided information on educational level, years in the current position, gender, and perceived level of morale in the office. Information was requested on the perceived level of morale to obtain a general impression on the morale of the office before meeting with the focus group. Similar to the interview guide, the background questionnaire was distributed as part of the expert content review and the methodologist review (see Expert Review of Instruments, Appendix A). The background questionnaire is available in Appendix F.

Pilot Study

The researcher piloted the interview guide and the background questionnaire upon approval of the dissertation committee and permission form the Institutional Review Board. Sagoe (2012) emphasized the dynamic qualities of focus groups. A pilot study was employed to modify the questions before continuing into the field. However, qualitative studies allow for modifications while conducting the research. The pilot study afforded an opportunity to reword or eliminate questions. In addition to examining focus group questions, the pilot ensured that an appropriate amount of time was allotted for the discussion. The moderator was given an opportunity to conduct a “dress rehearsal” prior to the actual event. Recording mechanisms were tested, and note taking and moderating procedures were practiced. Logistic issues also were identified.

At the conclusion of the pilot study, the group was asked to provide suggested revisions, and comments were solicited regarding content, wording, and methodology. Suggestions were incorporated into the final draft of the interview guide (Appendix E).

Procedures

An email was sent explaining the study, its purpose, and potential impact to registrars at selected institutions. Registrars were asked to submit a letter of support. In addition, a letter of support was required from the President of a state Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. Upon receipt of the letters, the researcher submitted them, along with the requirements for approval, through the Human Subjects Review Board.

Following IRB approval, a pilot study was conducted on the interview guide and background questionnaire involving a diverse group of individuals with knowledge of the processes within the Office of the Registrar. The researcher ensured the four participants were of varying ages, educational levels, and years of experience. Pilot group participants received and were asked to sign the consent form (Appendix H) after which the interview guide was distributed. The pilot focus group was conducted at Western Kentucky University at a time convenient for the participants. At the conclusion of the pilot study, participants were asked to provide feedback on the process, and revisions were made to the background questionnaire and interview guide based on the feedback.

After incorporating the suggestions from the pilot study, the researcher sent an explanatory email about the study to the registrar of each institution and requested it be sent to all non-managerial staff members. The revisions included the elimination of questions that could be answered with a one-word response and a reduction in the number of questions to decrease time. Those interested in the study were asked to contact the researcher; an email was sent to each, which contained a letter of consent (Appendix H) and preamble, along with the Qualtrics link to the background questionnaire (Appendix F). Qualtrics was utilized to house the data retrieved from the institutions. At least five individuals at three of the institutions expressed an interest in the study. The background questionnaire was not used for screening; however, it was used to address Research Question 6. Only one participant from the fourth institution expressed an interest; therefore, the researcher transformed the interview guide into a semi-structured interview for the individual from that institution. Employees from the fifth institution were unwilling to participate in the study.

The researcher worked with a representative from each institution to reserve a meeting space and determine an appropriate time to conduct the focus group. The selected participants were then contacted, along with the date and time of the scheduled meeting. The researcher traveled to each institution to facilitate the focus group, and sessions were video and audiotaped to assist in coding the data. Interview guides (Appendix E) were distributed at the focus group sessions, as the researcher preferred impromptu responses from participants.

Data derived from the focus group and semi-structured interviews were collected by the moderator. Focus groups typically are no longer than 90 minutes in length; the focus group for the current study was 60 minutes. The researcher used an informal setting to moderate the focus group or conduct the semi-structured interview, and participants were asked to read and sign the consent form as an agreement to participate. The moderator ensured confidentiality of the study, and each participant was assigned a number to assist in note taking. The semi-structured interview did not require a numbering system, as only one individual participated. The researcher distributed the interview guide to the focus group and allowed sufficient time to read through the questions, in accordance with Fowler's (2009) recommendation that participants be given an opportunity to question terms they may not understand.

Data Collection

The background questionnaire provided demographic information on each individual. Participants completed the questionnaire through Qualtrics a week prior to the focus group sessions. Due to the limited number of returned questionnaires, all participants were selected for the focus group. The sole individual from the fourth university participated in a semi-structured interview. The interview guide was used to assist with note taking and to provide an outline of the focus group conversational topics. The researcher used the interview guide administered to the focus group for the semi-structured interview. The focus groups and semi-structured interviews were audio recorded to assist with later note taking. The sessions were approximately 60 minutes in length.

Data Analysis

According to Sagoe (2012), the focus group sessions should be summarized immediately to prevent the loss of important information. The same is true when conducting semi-structured interviews. The information from the focus group and semi-structured interview are to be transcribed before the coding process can commence. The researcher used coding strategies for grounded theory to analyze the data. The researcher transcribed the data collected at the conclusion of the focus groups and the semi-structured interview. Using grounded theory coding, the researcher then determined open, axial, and selective coding categories along with a conditional matrix. Data were exported to SPSS from the background questionnaire located in Qualtrics. The researcher determined the themes emerging among different age groups, different educational levels, or those who considered themselves to have high morale versus those who identified with low morale. A Chi Square and Fisher's Exact Test was utilized to analyze the frequency of themes among the specific groups determined through the background questionnaire. The Fisher's Exact Test produced more accurate results due to the small sample size.

Validity

Anfara et al. (2009) discussed internal and external validity in terms of credibility and transferability. Anfara et al. and Creswell (2013) emphasized that credibility, or internal validity, is established through prolonged time in the field, triangulation, and peer review. Transferability, or external validity, is established through thick descriptions.

Credibility is evident in this study. The researcher spent a prolonged amount of time in the field building relationships with the participants. The researcher possessed an understanding of the processes of the registrar's office and built relationships with the management team at each institution. In addition, the researcher worked with experts in the field to finalize the interview guide prior to distribution to the focus group and the semi-structured interview participant; an expert methodologist discussed the data collection and analysis plan. Finally, the collected data was triangulated using theory triangulation with the existing research on morale. See Chapter V for additional information.

Transferability, or external validity, was derived from the descriptions provided by the research sample. The themes emerging from the data related to any registrar's office sharing the same responsibilities. Missions for registrar's offices typically are similar in nature. Therefore, job responsibilities would be similar among institutions. To ensure connections were made between offices, Creswell (2013) suggested using detailed thick descriptions.

Reliability

The reliability of this study is evident through the process used to collect the data. The researcher conducted focus groups among three different groups within the same profession by traveling to the sites located in the targeted geographic areas within the state. The researcher then used the same interview guide or semi-structured interview questions for each group of participants, which ensured that all participants answered the same questions in the same order. Background questionnaire results indicated that the group was diverse; the individuals ranged in age, educational level, and number of years in the profession.

Ethical Issues

Ethical issues are prevalent in qualitative research. Creswell (2013) discussed the protection of privacy of participants. When conducting focus groups, participants are located in one meeting space to discuss issues that can be sensitive. The researcher must stress confidentiality and be clear about the goals of the study, as well as having no hidden agenda in conducting the study. The consent form should be explicitly explained by striving to build trust with participants. Smithson (2000) noted that the moderator should possess a background in the field, which will help to establish trust among the participants. Sagoe (2012) stressed that strong interpersonal and personal qualities are needed by the moderator to gain trust.

Eliminating bias also is crucial in qualitative research. Smithson (2012) established that moderator attitude and behavior can affect the focus group. Therefore, the moderator must be mindful of verbal responses and nonverbal cues used during the focus groups and semi-structured interview. In addition, Smithson stated that moderators from a similar background are likely to show no bias, as they understand the level of work and expectations. The researcher in this study works in the field and is aware of the responsibilities of the registrar's office. A self-analysis was conducted after taking field notes to help identify bias. During the self-analysis, the researcher documented bias, including holding a management-level position within the Office of the Registrar. The researcher also knew the majority of the job functions within the office and was aware of turnover within the certain offices.

Human Subjects

Prior to the data collection process, approval was received from the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Western Kentucky University. Participants in the study were staff members from Southeastern, public institutions. The institutions were chosen because of their similar enrollment and organizational structure within the Office of the Registrar. Two institutions were eliminated due to lack of participation among support staff. Prior to conducting the focus group, the researcher distributed via email a background questionnaire using Qualtrics, which helped to ensure focus groups were derived from a diverse group of support staff from each institution. In addition, a signed consent form was obtained from all employees willing to participate in the focus group. The consent form explained the confidentiality of the study and that a coding scheme would be utilized to prevent identification of a particular institution or focus group participant. In addition, the preamble and consent form explained the intent of the study and informed participants that no foreseeable risks were involved. The researcher and students were given a copy of the consent form. Each participant's confidentiality was warranted (to the extent permitted by law), according to WKU's Human Subject office.

Summary

Research on morale is limited within higher education, particularly in the registrar's offices. The researcher chose a grounded theory framework to conduct this qualitative study. Creswell (2013) stated that grounded theory is appropriate when studies have not been conducted in a particular field, even if the topic is common. The framework applies toward a study of morale within selected registrar's offices in Southeastern region.

The researcher chose five institutions in which to conduct the study. The registrar at each was contacted and asked for a letter of support, and all complied with the request. The researcher also requested a letter of support from the President of the a state Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admission Officers for which the President complied. Experts in the field and experienced with methodology conducted reviews to assist with validity. IRB approval was granted, and a pilot study was conducted with a purposeful sample to garner feedback for enhancements and revisions. After revisions were made, the researcher sent each registrar an email to forward to potential participants.

The study was presented with challenges. Focus groups were an option at only three of the institutions where enough individuals volunteered to participate. At the fourth institution, a semi-structured interview was conducted, as only one person was willing to participate. The fifth institution did not provide any respondents and was deleted from the study. The background questionnaire was meant to screen focus group participants; however, all volunteers were accepted in order to meet the minimum number recommended for focus groups.

The researcher screened for bias through self-reflection after writing field notes. In addition, the researcher, who also served as the moderator, monitored verbal and nonverbal cues during the focus group to eliminate influence over the group. Confidentiality was emphasized verbally and in written format through the consent form.

The researcher illustrated the study's reliability through focus groups at different geographic locations within the state. To assist with reliability, the same set of questions were asked of support staff participants with similar job responsibilities in offices with similar organizational structure. In addition, the researcher was fortunate to have solicited a diverse group of participants with varying years of experience and educational backgrounds. The interview guide was used at all locations and to conduct the semi-structured interview.

CHAPTER IV: RESULTS

The Office of the Registrar completes necessary functions for the university, which enables the institution to accurately report enrollment, academic achievement, and course offerings. Since the tasks are crucial, the staff within the office must produce quality work in large quantities. Robbins (2003) studied the morale of faculty and staff in higher education and found a decrease due to of budget cuts, resulting in insufficient staff to complete tasks, enrollment increases without faculty or staff to adequately address the needs of the students, and programming cuts. Robbins' research primarily focused on faculty and academic department issues rather than non-academic departmental morale.

This study explored morale from the perspective of staff members working in the Office of the Registrar at Southeastern, public institutions. Staff members were questioned on leadership strategies, motivators, low and high morale indicators, and the effect of demographics on morale. While support was garnered from five institutions, staff members from only four responded, indicating their willingness to participate in the study. The institutions were selected because of their similar internal organizational structure and work responsibilities. Using a grounded theory framework, data was collected and coding strategies were utilized to determine themes among staff perceptions. The goal of the research was to answer the central research question: How do registrar's office staff perceive the conditions of their work environment as related to morale?

Staff from four institutions discussed the factors affecting morale in the Office of the Registrar. Participants included various age groups, education backgrounds, and varying years of experience, and all were female. Research points to a link between quality customer service and morale; therefore, staff members discussed their perceptions on morale in the office. Each candidly discussed their leader’s management style and strategies used to boost morale within the office. The groups also defined their perspective of an individual with low and high morale based on their work experiences. The findings in this study are intended to assist leaders in understanding the current state of morale within these institutions. Also, the research delineates staff opinions on the relationship between office morale and customer service, retention, and the fulfillment of the office mission.

This chapter will discuss the Expert Review of Instrumentation, Pilot Feedback on the Interview Guide, Procedures, and Findings and will provide a summary of main points discussed.

Content Review of Instrumentation

Two professionals reviewed the background questionnaire and focus group interview guide upon approval from the Institutional Review Board at Western Kentucky University. The professionals provided leadership to key areas within the Office of the Registrar. Two main issues were raised concerning the interview guide. First, some of the questions did not generate discussion. The reviewers suggested rewording in order to require more explanation and generate discussion among the group. Also, the reviewers expressed concern over the length of the focus group meetings. The interview guide seemed especially long based on the information provided to the reviewers on the timeframe of the focus groups.

The researcher consulted with an expert methodologist to request a review of methodology. The suggestion was made to modify the study, as no staff agreed to participate from one institution, and only one agreed from another institution. As a result, the researcher conducted three focus group sessions and one semi-structured interview.

Based on the provided feedback (see Expert Review of Instrumentation, Appendix A), the research questions were revised to generate more discussion, rather than using those that could be answered with a simple “yes” or “no.” Upon further reflection, some questions were consolidated or eliminated to shorten the instrument in order to fit within the time constraints. The revised instrumentation was tested during the pilot study.

Pilot Feedback on Interview Guide

A pilot study was conducted to ensure the background questionnaire and interview guides were feasible and to test recording equipment. Four professionals, with varying ages and educational levels, were asked to participate in the pilot study. At the conclusion of the session, feedback was solicited on both tools to be used for data collection. The results of the pilot study were positive; therefore, the researcher contacted each registrar to locate meeting space and determine a time and day to conduct the focus group at each institution.

Procedures

The study was conducted in two parts. First, participants were asked to complete a background questionnaire to collect demographic information in an attempt to determine whether various age groups, educational levels, and years of experience required different motivators to boost morale. The second part of the study included focus groups. Prior to conducting the study, the registrar of each institution was contacted to obtain letters of support. After receipt of the letters, the registrars were emailed a description of the study to forward to potential participants; and interested individuals were asked to contact the researcher. Focus groups were conducted at three institutions; a semi-structured interview was conducted at one institution because of lack of participation. A complete explanation of the procedures was outlined in Chapter III.

Demographic Survey

The participant background questionnaire was used to collect demographic data. All individuals were asked whether their personal morale within the office was high or low, years of office work experience, age, educational level, and gender. All participants completed the same demographic survey prior to participating in the focus group survey or semi-structured interview.

The original goal of the demographic survey was to screen those who were willing to participate in the study in order to ensure diversity. However, despite frequent requests to the registrar and staff members, only four to five responses were received from three of the institutions. At another institution, only one person agreed to participate. The researcher received no responses from one of the institutions; however, the registrar responded that most of the staff were new to the office.

Questionnaire responses were used as a part of the coding process. Statements were coded based on age, educational level, years of experience, and morale level. Gender was not coded, as all participants were female. The number of questionnaire participants totaled 15. All were staff members without management responsibilities within the Office of the Registrar at public institutions having similar office structure. Therefore, all participants met the criteria for the study.

Focus Group Interviews

After completing the demographic survey, participants took part in the focus group interview. The researcher facilitated the sessions and conducted the semi-structured interview, and all were digitally recorded. Notes were taken regarding the seating of participants and the order in which comments were made. Facial expressions also were notated.

The intent of the focus group was to gather staff perceptions on the level of morale within the Office of the Registrar at institutions with similar structuring. In addition, staff were asked to elaborate on leadership styles and motivators that encouraged high morale and also to define characteristics of a person with low or high morale. The job responsibilities in each office were similar; therefore, staff were asked to identify those responsibilities that caused low or high morale.

The following describes the process used to solicit participants for the study, including the specifics for each focus group. The researcher chose to not disclose the name of the institution as a means to protect the identity of the participants, as well as any leaders within the office. Each institution is coded with the state abbreviation, along with the institution number (INS-1; INS-2; INS-3; INS-4; INS-5). Findings from each institution will use the same institutional coding scheme.

Institution One (INS-1). The initial process involved the following. The researcher contacted the registrar at INS-1 to solicit support for the study. Upon receipt of support, an email was composed to explain the study and the confidentiality, which was forwarded by the Registrar to each staff member. Those staff members expressing interest were asked to contact the principal researcher. Four responses were received from interested staff members. The focus group was conducted on campus in a conference room convenient to the participants. All were female and from different areas within the office, and each was assigned a number to coincide with the background questionnaire and group responses. The group was asked to read and sign the consent form for the background questionnaire, with time allowed for questions. The background questionnaire was distributed and collected upon completion, after which the focus group consent form was distributed, confidentiality was discussed, and the rationale for recording the sessions was explained. The researcher facilitated the focus group, and participants gave seemingly frank responses. All expressed concern with the question on the background questionnaire, which asked them to determine check whether they had a low or high morale. None identified with high morale. Three out of four indicated they were neither, but leaned toward low. One identified with low morale. The group discussed each question, although the group noticeably lacked the cohesiveness that was apparent with the other focus groups used in the study. Participants reminded the researcher several times that the office had endured several changes in recent years. The focus group was approximately one hour in length.

Institution Two (INS-2). The same initial process utilized for INS-1 was employed at INS-2. The researcher received five responses from staff members at INS-2 who were interested in participating in the study. The focus group was held in an unoccupied office convenient to the individuals. All were female and represented at least three areas of the office. The participants in the focus group were the most jovial and cohesive group of those taking part in the study. Candid responses were given to questions, and participants elaborated on the answers of others. All identified as having high workplace morale, which they attributed to management and teamwork. The focus group was approximately one hour in length.

Institution Three (INS-3). Upon completion of the initial process, the researcher received four responses from staff members at INS-3 who expressed an interest in participating in the study. The focus group was held in a conference room convenient to the staff members. All participants were female and very familiar with all responsibilities within the office. The participants were slow to initiate discussion; however, when discussion began, individuals were very open and forthcoming with their responses. All identified as having high workplace morale, which was attributed to flexibility provided by management and the workplace atmosphere. The focus group was approximately one hour in length.

Institution Four (INS-4). The initial process was completed, and only one response was received from a staff member at INS-4. After consultation with a methodologist, the decision was made to conduct a semi-structured interview. The participant was female and worked in a major area within the office, although she was familiar with all job functions. The participant provided lengthy responses to all questions in the interview and identified as having high morale, which was perceived to be a result of the use of an alternate work schedule within the office. The interview was approximately 30 minutes in length.

Institution Five (INS-5). Upon completion of the initial process, the researcher received no responses from staff members at INS-5. A follow-up was conducted with the registrar, who sent a second message to staff. The institution was cut from the study after discussion with the registrar. The office had experienced a large among of turnover and many of the staff members had been in the office for only a short amount of time. Therefore, eliminating the institution from the study seemed appropriate.

Findings

The findings from this study are based on the background questionnaire and the focus groups. Information collected from the background questionnaire will be discussed at the conclusion of the focus group findings, as the questionnaire dealt with demographic factors of research questions (RQ) 1-5. RQ6 addressed demographics within the office and its relationship to morale. The focus group data includes Research Questions 1-6, and findings are grouped by research question and corresponding focus group question. Focus groups or semi-structured interview questions are notated as Questions. Focus groups questions mapped to specific research questions can be found in Appendix C.

Focus Group Responses

Focus group findings are grouped by research questions and corresponding focus group/semi-structured interview questions. Comments are grouped by institution. All research questions were asked from the perspective of registrar's office staff.

Research Question 1. What is the level of morale in the office?

Question 1: How can you recognize if an employee in the office has low morale?

INS-1. In general, the group mentioned the overall attitude, including the mood or behavior of an employee, is an identifier of low morale. They also felt morale could be gauged by a coworker's reaction to change and the quality of work produced. One participant mentioned determining morale through watching the coworker's interactions with others in the office. Another participant stated, "How they treat other people from other areas of campus." The participants did not mention the person's interactions with customers.

INS-2. Participants spoke candidly about their experiences with low morale in the office and measures taken by the office to reduce low morale. The participants determined busy times were stressful and causing low morale. All agreed mannerisms and behavior clearly showed low morale among coworkers. Comments are below.

"In our department, low morale is usually during our stressful times. I see that sometimes we are more short with students, and those are the things we have been working on to make a major effort in being more customer service related. We have survey cards to pass out whenever students are requesting information. We encourage them to do that, and the comments on those really hit home on some of the things that we are doing that we could do better. Our stressful times seem to project out to students; we are trying to eliminate that."

"You can tell by their looks. You can see others are struggling in their mannerisms."

INS-3. The participants stated morale was determined through interactions within the office and with customers. They felt coworkers with low morale were the least likely to help complete tasks. In addition, they felt those with low morale were generally unpleasant at work.

INS-4. The participant stated low morale was easy to identify, as coworkers with low morale tend to have poor job performance. In addition, those with low morale do not help other coworkers complete tasks.

1.a: High morale?

INS-1. In general, the participants feel those with high morale are more positive about work and the experiences therein and maintain a positive attitude about work. Two out of the four agreed that high morale was related to a good attitude about work. They disagreed about an employee's overall happiness and its impact on morale.

One employee stated, "They wish to interact with others and share personal and work related items instead of keeping things inside. They are happier and smile more."

Another employee disagreed stating, "I think you can be a happy person in life and not have high morale at work. They may be happy go lucky but may have lower work morale just because of circumstances in the office."

INS-2. All participants said those with high morale were willing to provide extra service to customers and were more talkative and interactive. Some employees were willing to walk students through a process to ensure the student got the best service possible. Those who do not are recognized by the staff and offered help to boost morale. Comments are below.

"They are more talkative and interact more with a customer. We don't just sit there and ask what students need; we show them how to do it. The student leaves thinking they were nice and not mean or cold-hearted."

"Students come in and get that home-town feeling. They feel like people go that extra step to make sure the customer is taken care of."

"If she sees a student who has a form in the hall, she will go up and ask if she can help with that. I think that means a lot to people. It's not trivial."

INS-3. Participants indicated those with high morale exhibit the opposite behavior of those with low morale. Individuals with high morale were thought to be more willing to help others. Also, those with high morale had positive interactions within the office.

"How they interact with other people; they are pleasant, easy to get along with, helpful; also, how they interact with our customers."

INS-4. The participant identified those with high morale by their work ethic. She said, "They appear to want to be at work. They get their job done in a timely manner and are willing to help others."

Question 2: What is your sense of how length of employment is related to morale?

INS-1. Three out of four employees perceived length of employment to be related to morale. However, two pointed out that older employees are less likely to leave the job because of the benefits. One participant perceived length of employment as a means for high morale because the employee can take comfort in thoroughly understanding the processes of the job. Some comments are listed below.

"Something I have noticed in working in higher education, is that just because someone has a low work morale or isn't happy is not as likely to leave because they like the benefits of working at the institution."

"I'm going to add to that as well. With the economy the way it is, it's hard to judge because it is hard to find a job. Seven years ago, I would say they would leave. Now, you might not be too quick to leave the job, because you can't find another job. We have some great benefits."

"That is why I came here in the first place. I came here for the time off. That's the only reason I came here."

"I would never leave now, because I am close to retirement."

"There is also a comfort level with what you do, and that contributes to a level of satisfaction and causes you to have a higher morale than if you were in a new position. If you don't know what you are doing, you can feel overwhelmed at the end of the day."

INS-2. The group was split on how the length of employment affects morale. One participant felt those with less time in the office are more prone to low morale. Another felt employees who had worked fewer years in the office were least likely to be affected by change; whereas, those who had worked longer were prone to having low morale during periods of change. However, they also said that those who had been in the office longer were more likely to become jaded and intolerant of students or experience periods of low and high morale. Comments follow.

"I think the shorter length of employment tends to be lower morale. I think the older it tends to be a rollercoaster. They get in a routine and when something changes everything comes unglued and the morale struggles."

"When something big happens, people who haven't been here very long are like whatever. But, the people who have been here longer are like, 'Oh goodness.'"

"Some people have become jaded. It's not their fault; they have just heard so many lies and excuses. I don't know how that wouldn't affect you after a while."

"Sometimes the people who have been here longer have less tolerance because we have encountered the same problems over and over."

INS-3. Discussion was limited on this topic. However, one participant felt this did not apply to her office. She perceived that her coworkers were not in a hurry to leave work, because the work environment was positive. Another mentioned that employees who had worked in the organization longer may have low morale because of mundane routines. Comments follow.

"You look at this office and how many people have been here for so long, and I think that says something good. I can compare it to comments I hear from other offices of how they want to get out of there as quickly as possible."

"I have seen that people who work there longer sometimes can have low morale in a way. The daily, same old thing or same complaints every day…it's kind of negative."

INS-4. The participant stated that length of employment often affected morale because of the changes faced by more seasoned coworkers. Those with new job responsibilities or who must learn new skills are believed to have lower morale. Her comment follows.

"I think sometimes the longer they are here the more they are…sometimes their morale goes down as duties change in the office. If someone has to go through a lot of change and things are not consistent, it lowers morale for that individual."

Question 3: How does nonverbal communication affect morale of staff?

INS-1. All participants agreed communication was very important in the workplace. Nonverbal communication was identified as being negative because problems go unresolved. Comments follow.

"There's nothing like getting a look when you ask how someone is. You avoid them the rest of the day because they are in a bad mood."

"Sometimes you can look at someone and know you are not going to approach them."

INS-2. The participants viewed nonverbal communication as both positive and negative. However, all agreed nonverbal communication can affect the morale of others. One participant mentioned helping a coworker through a personal crisis by spraying silly string on others or wearing mustaches. Another mentioned the negative facial expressions of some employees during staff meetings. Comments follow.

"Sometimes we can have an office-wide staff meeting, and someone makes a comment or statement and people roll their eyes and huff. It's not verbal, but it is inferred, 'Here we go again!'"

"If somebody catches the expression at the right time, you wonder what that was about. It makes you think there is something there and you start questioning."

INS-3. The group agreed nonverbal communication affects morale, including facial expressions and gestures. All agreed verbal communication affected morale more than nonverbal.

INS-4. The participant felt nonverbal communication could positively or negatively affect morale. Nonverbal communication was perceived as being stronger than verbal. The participant said, "Sometimes the unspoken word is stronger than the spoken word, and it can lower morale. It can also encourage with the occasional pat on the back."

3.a: Verbal?

INS-1. Verbal communication was identified as a way to decrease workplace tension and a means to resolve problems. The participants stated open communication prevents employees from making assumptions about problems, concerns, and behaviors. Comments are shown below.

"With verbal you can talk it out, but with nonverbal you don't even want to approach that person."

"At least with verbal, the problem comes out."

INS-2. Participants cited communication as a means to reduce low morale. Everyone agreed that being informed increased an employee's self-worth and let the employee know his or her job responsibilities are important. This group identified higher levels of administration as a source for causing low morale, as decisions affecting the office were not communicated. Instead, the changes were heard through other offices. Comments follow.

"I think keeping the office informed makes a big difference in morale. It makes sure individual employees are not blindsided from above. You start thinking you are not important enough to know. You start thinking you don't need to know."

"I don't like people thinking I am clueless and don't know that I am doing."

"For some reason, frequently we will hear from other departments: Why weren't you at that meeting because it affected our policy? We find out no one was invited, and people who made the decision never told you. That really brings people down. You start thinking that if they didn't think to tell me, they must not know we exist."

INS-3. This group perceived verbal communication as positive. One participant said she enjoys listening to coworkers laugh and talk. She said she believes the office is perceived as a positive work environment because the group is close.

"Everyone takes time to visit here and there. Not all the time, but you know, but we are not glued to our desk at certain times of the year then that's good for morale."

INS-4. The respondent believed verbal communication was crucial in describing expectations and conveying the goals of projects. It also was identified as a way to boost morale when used effectively.

Research Question 2. To what extent are registrar's office work-related functions related to low morale?

Question 4: What are the primary job responsibilities of your Office of the Registrar?

INS-1. Participants summarized the job responsibilities, to include maintaining student records, athletic certification, degree certification, room scheduling, VA Certification, and residency. Participants also identified front-line services including issuing transcripts, name and address changes, and maintaining a one-stop center for students to submit forms and ask questions.

INS-2. The participants listed the responsibilities within the office, to include issuing transcripts, enrollment verifications, VA Certification, NCAA Eligibility, degree certification, degree audit programming, determining residency, general reporting, and class scheduling. One participant summed up the thoughts of the group when she said, "I think we are the heart of the university. We flow out to everything at the University."

INS-3. Participants provided a list of general job responsibilities, including record maintenance, customer service, helping retain students, awarding degrees, transfer articulation, issue transcripts, manage curriculum, update the catalog, and update the course inventory.

INS-4. The job responsibilities were listed and included posting credit, issuing transcripts, sending various verifications, serving as record keepers, ensuring accuracy of records, assisting with registration, working with VA, and the undergraduate catalog.

Question 5: What are the busiest times within the Office of the Registrar?

INS-1. All participants agreed the work never stops. However, the office experiences highs and lows in different areas. To elaborate on this, participants made the following comments.

"In terms of the one-stop idea, the beginnings of the semester in terms of foot traffic for that part of the office. I do graduation and athletic certification, so my busy times are different from others. The foot traffic is at the beginning of the semester or graduation deadlines."

"The busiest day at the front is one day after a deadline. It always amazes me."

INS-2. Participants indicated that busy seasons within the office do not coincide. However, they all agreed the busiest times are at the beginning and end of the semester. They admitted not knowing the busy times for VA certification or athletic eligibility.

"There are busy seasons for each area, and they don't coincide at the same time. Typically, registration and grade times have the most traffic and the most volume of work."

INS-3. Participants felt the busy time for the area posting degrees and issuing transcripts was the end of the semester. The beginning and the end of term were identified as busy times for those recording transfer work.

INS-4. May and December were identified as the busiest times, even though the participant believed her office has busy periods all year. Graduation periods were cited as times requiring teamwork. Her comments follow.

"For us personally, we are busy year-round. As for the office in general, May and December are busy because that is the time for graduation. Everyone gets pulled for different graduation responsibilities. The transfer coordinators are busy in January and August."

Question 6: To what extent do you believe morale suffers during peak times?

INS-1. The participants agreed that morale suffers during peak times, which are associated with stress because of the massive increase in workload. Peak times and workload were associated with not recognizing the importance of the outcome. Comments are below.

"I think it suffers during peak times because that's when people start feeling like they are putting in all these hours and doing all this work. I think that leads to low morale."

"The higher the stress level, the more the morale is going to go down."

INS-2. The participants attributed leadership strategies for morale being high during peak times for proactive leaders. Treats are used to keep staff happy and upbeat. When working late nights, leaders provide pizza. In addition, chocolate is used to boost spirits during the day. Comments follow.

"Supervisors will bring in pizza for people staying late. Customers don't understand it is really stressful. They believe they are one person with one question."

"Chocolate goes a long way."

INS-3. Participants did not believe morale suffered during peak work periods. Instead, they felt coworkers believed staying busy caused the day to pass faster. One participant stated she would rather stay busy than have to find something to do.

"I like the business of it. It makes the day go faster."

"I don't think busy times cause low morale. I would rather be busy than have to find something to do."

INS-4. The participant said morale faltered during peak times. She said workers felt overworked and underpaid. The participant said, "I believe it suffers during peak times. People who feel overworked and underpaid are morale issues."

Question 6.a: During slow times?

INS-1. Slow times at work were believed to lead to high morale. One participant summed up the feelings of the group best. She felt that morale was low because of the constant change in leadership and transitioning of responsibilities to other staff members.

"You don't feel as overwhelmed. Part of this office that is an interesting piece is we just have a lot of turnover and transition in our leadership. So, I think that plays a part in it too. We've all been taking on a lot of responsibilities. So, we haven't had a lot of slow times."

INS-2. To keep morale high during slow times, the participants said leaders encouraged project planning and working on necessary functions that are forsaken during busy times such as moving files, updating procedures manuals, and creating new queries or reports. According to one participant, redesigning slow times has prevented employees from pretending to read the catalog to fill the time in a day.

“Everyone brainstorms and has projects, like moving folders from the vault or coming up with a query or report.”

“That’s when I think about how we do things and rewrite our procedures.”

INS-3. This group believed neither peak nor slow times caused low morale. The participants stated that staff members enjoy the break and having extra time to complete housekeeping tasks. Slow times also provide an opportunity to work on special projects.

“I like the break.”

“It’s nice to have that change of scenery every once in a while - a change from being so busy and having some extra time.”

INS-4. The participant discussed that slow periods boost morale by providing more time for fellowship among coworkers. It allows time to complete housekeeping projects. In addition, slow periods allow staff to take a break from the rush suffered during peak periods.

Question 7: What specific required activities within the office cause low morale?

INS-1. The participants shared stories on necessary job responsibilities causing low morale. Participants identified delivering bad news as a function that caused negativity. In addition, the lack of gratitude from supervisors and customers also were mentioned as a source of low morale. Comments are listed below.

“I think job responsibilities where you have to give bad news to someone, like telling someone they don’t meet residency and can’t have in-state tuition…when you have to give news to someone that they don’t want to hear and you know it isn’t going to go well.”

"I feel like I only give bad news with the way we certify graduation. We check everything manually and communicate with them. So, it happens a lot because there isn't that much help along the way. The students find out information late in the game. It affects my morale to tell students they are not going to graduate."

"You go above and beyond for someone to give information or help with something and give them personal attention and help, and the person doesn't even bother to say thank you. It makes me wonder why I bother."

"I think not feeling appreciated by the supervisor for the work I do. There was a time in the 17 years I've been here that I felt like I would walk out of the door and no one would miss me. When imaging came to a halt, it was like my task wasn't important anymore. That's how I felt and it affected my morale."

INS-2. Participants agreed giving bad news is a source of low morale, including telling students they are unable to graduate. However, the office is very proactive in ensuring the workplace is very positive during these stressful times through games and plenty of laughter.

INS-3. Regarding job responsibilities that can cause low morale, the participants discussed dealing with students who enter the office with a bad attitude. The group theorized that workers who deal with a high volume of upset students would have lower morale. Two participants mentioned telling students their degree could not be awarded.

"I think if a student comes in with a bad attitude, you sort of take on their bad attitude for a period of time."

"Students turn not graduating around to make you responsible, even though you know you are not."

INS-4. The participant said telling a student he or she cannot graduate causes low morale. However, she also felt not being able to record transfer work faster caused low morale. Her comments follow.

"We don't like telling students that we have so much work that we can't get their transfer transcripts as quickly as they want it. We don't have enough employees to get it done."

Question 7.a: High morale?

INS-1. The first respondent mentioned off-work holidays as a means to boost morale, which caused laughter. However, after focusing on the question, they determined that job responsibilities involving teamwork or finishing a task caused high morale. Comments follow.

"When we stuff diplomas, morale is high. We do it as a group and create assembly line."

"When you know you have backup and come together as a team, it really helps."

"For me personally, I like to complete a task. If I have a stack of papers and see a pile go away, I am very happy."

INS-2. The participants cited teamwork and having a fun work environment as a source of high morale. They all agreed helping students navigate the registration process and graduating students are all reasons to have high morale. The participants believed all work functions could produce high morale if the work environment is positive.

INS-3. One participant stated she enjoyed working with people and providing customer service. Another mentioned posting degrees on students' records. The participants agreed any position that did not have to deliver bad news would boost morale.

INS-4. Office tasks resulting in high morale were any involving teamwork. Coming together to work commencement was mentioned as a source of high morale. The participant stated that her coworkers enjoyed commencement because it was symbolic of the office completing a goal. She said, "We have our own part in commencement, and that builds up morale. We work the ceremony and feel like we have accomplished a goal, and that makes us proud."

Research Question 3. How do staff view work environment motivators in relation to morale:

3.a: Monetary awards?

Question 8: To what extent would a monetary award, such as a raise or stipend, boost morale within the office?

INS-1. Some participants believed money is the key to office happiness. However, they also mentioned that money could be a source of contention. All agreed that across the board raises were frustrating when all members were not performing at the level of others. Merit based raises should be taken seriously.

"I think money always helps morale."

"I think there are also cases where you feel like some individuals shouldn't be awarded money because they aren't doing their part. So, you get frustrated because they get the same as you, but they aren't doing their job."

INS-2. The participants agreed merit raises would help boost morale and cause staff to work harder. While raises have been minimal at the institution, other university benefits were cited as a means to boost morale, to include health incentives and salary increases given by the university to align positions with industry standards. One participant elaborated on merit based raises and how it would affect work ethic.

"If it was a merit based, they want to give you something because of your hard work. If they would give us one, that would make us work hard and make it worth the effort."

INS-3. Everyone agreed monetary rewards would boost morale. However, the group said additional benefits offered through the university and simply getting a paycheck was plenty. One participant admitted she recognized that a raise would help many; however, she felt having an upbeat work environment had a greater ability to lift morale. Comments follow.

"When someone mentions not getting a raise, I am happy to have a job. I think of people that don't have a job. I know some don't want a job, but a lot of them do. I am thankful I have a job. And, it is in a nice place that is clean. I am not working in a coal mine. I'm not holding a sign in the blistering sun on the blacktop."

"We get other benefits other than the pay."

INS-4. Since raises had not been given in many years, the participant said money would boost morale; although, adequate staffing to accomplish work would raise morale more than money. She explained, "We've not had a raise in many years; it would be a high motivator, but adequate staffing to get the job done would probably be better."

Question 9: How long would it take before the staff would require another monetary award to boost morale?

INS-1. Despite this group's opinion that money always boosts morale, they agreed that money is a short-term fix to a long-term problem. The group also seemed frustrated by raises that were offered but were offset with increased parking and benefit fees. The raises did not boost morale; instead, the raises caused resentment.

"Money is a short-lived memory. You might get your raise, and in three months already feel like you need another one."

"One year they gave us a raise, but increased parking, and we lost money. My paycheck went down."

INS-2. The participants agreed a raise would be a short-term fix to morale issues. The major concern was across the board raises. The consensus was, if morale was that, low and the work was mediocre, money would not produce better results. Rather, the raise would be viewed as a reward for doing mediocre work.

"It makes it miserable to go above and beyond, and it never seems to be rewarded. You don't even get a 'Way to go.' It is actually going above and beyond, but others feel like it is just your job."

"If it is our job to go above and beyond, then why doesn't it matter when others don't go above and beyond?"

INS-3. Comments were very limited. However, one participant believed employees would need another raise after 24 months; another believed a raise would be needed every 12 months.

INS-4. Discussion was limited as the participant felt raises would be required every year to keep morale high. Therefore, she believed this was not a good way to boost morale.

3.b: Alternative work schedules?

Question 10: What is your perception about an alternative work schedule and its relationship with morale?

INS-1. The participants all thought alternate work schedules would boost morale. They discussed instances where alternate schedules were allowed for specific individuals and talked about the resentment by others who were not granted the opportunity. They stressed fairness when allowing alternate work schedules. One participant questioned whether an alternate work schedule would cause more work for others.

"Love it. At different times, people have had the opportunity to use the schedule based on the situation."

"It happens on a case-by-case basis, but it has not been offered to everyone. That has been a negative, because in the past there have been people who have been given the opportunity while others are not offered a special deal. It caused resentment."

"It makes you angry because they are allowed to do it, but I can't. Why was that person allowed to work four 10's and get a day off? But, I think it is a great morale booster if you are allowed to do it. I think if affects those around them. Does it increase someone else's workload when that person is not there?"

INS-2. The group responded positively to alternate work schedules and believed they would boost morale in the office. One participant cited office flexibility and cross-training as a means to adopt alternate work scheduling. Another who has children stated that it would make life less stressful.

"Personally, I have two children actively involved with sports. Sometimes I would just like to stay late so I can be off an afternoon. That would make a big difference."

"I don't deal with the public a lot. I am a notary, but some people are forced to be here at a certain time because of the public interaction. The public knows we are open, but it would be nice if they could stagger. If it became an issue, we could redo things."

INS-3. The participants believed alternate work schedules would boost morale; however, they were concerned with how the schedule would work in an office so focused on customer service. One participant stated she understood that those with young children would prefer the schedule. However, the flexibility offered through lunch hours was sufficient to meet her personal needs. Comments follow.

"I don't think we need to stick to a rigid schedule. We just need a day here or there to take lunch at the end of the day."

"I don't see in an office like this how that could work."

"I guess if my kids were younger, that might be something I would want to look into. But, for me, mine are getting older. That personally would not affect my morale one way or the other."

INS-4. The participant had personal experience with an alternate work schedule, since the office and university offered the flexibility to all employees. She said the opportunity to work such a schedule boosted morale. She indicated that the quiet time in the morning or evening, depending on the schedule, allows an employee to catch up on activities without the distraction of the telephone or walk-in traffic.

Question 11: What types of an alternate work schedule would best boost morale?

INS-1. The general consensus was that they preferred to pick their work schedule. Despite their personal preferences, they admitted selecting personal schedules would be difficult in an office that must offer a large quantity of customer service. One participant mentioned that her work area is cross-trained and employees are willing to help when coworkers are out. Having backups was discussed. However, one participant stated that it was inappropriate to ask a person to be a backup, if that person makes less than the one being helped. Comments are below.

"Naturally, I would rather pick my own. I might decide to work 6:30am – 2:00pm, and others may choose the same thing. Who gets to do it because we have to be open?"

"You think about how other offices get to do it. But, we are so customer service driven and involved. We basically need to be here for customers."

"In transfer, we all do the same thing. We could cover things when others are not here because we do the same job."

"I may not get paid as much as the person I am backing up. You make more money than I do, and I have to do your job while you are away-that's not fair."

INS-2. The participants preferred to pick a work schedule. However, each recognized the office is customer service oriented. With this in mind, they agreed the best situation would be to provide a schedule where employees could stagger times.

INS-3. The participant with a young child discussed the type of alternate work schedule she perceived would work best for others. Another commented that having a flexible lunch hour helped when attempting to find balance between professional and personal lives. Comments follow.

"I wouldn't need it all the time. When he has things at school or doctor's appointments, if I took my lunch at the end of the day instead of during the day, which would be helpful. But, I am happy with my schedule that I have."

"It would affect morale if we didn't have the option to leave at 3:30 like we have now. Because, we know we have to be places. We feel like we can do that not every day, but as needed."

"It would be different if you were a place where you couldn't do that."

INS-4. The participant said the current schedule in her office was the ideal schedule to boost morale, as employees are allowed to take an hour adjustment. They can come in to work an hour early and leave an hour early, or they can come in an hour later and leave an hour later. Lunch flexibility also is available. However, everyone works during peak hours. The participant described why the schedule worked best for her.

"I am a parent with children. So, I can put my children on the bus, and I can also pick them up at school. My coworker is married and doesn't have children. He prefers to sleep in, so he gets here later. I get to leave at 3:15, because I adjusted my lunch by 15 minutes so I can pick up my kids from school. It definitely improved my morale."

3.c: Relationships?

Question 12: To what extent do you believe staff members who have friendships with other staff members at work have a higher morale?

INS-1. The group believed friendships within the office were important. However, they expressed negative concern from a person being excluded from a group. Little discussion was generated.

"It can. If, for example, you have someone who feels left out. Someone may say we are going to get a drink-someone might feel left out. If I go get a drink, I have to do it by myself."

INS-2. Friendships within this office have helped coworkers through personal crises. They stressed that relationships help individuals find balance between their personal and professional lives. The group shared stories and agreed personal issues followed staff to work. Finding a friend with whom to share experiences seemed to ease burdens. The group described the office as family, rather than friends. One participant explained that families can get tired or irritated with one, but they overcome.

"They are there for you when bad things happen. You know they are there. They are also there to enjoy the good things that happen to you."

"Sometimes it is nice to know someone else gets it. There isn't a single person that I couldn't talk to about my bad days. You just want someone to agree with you and listen."

"It's nice to have a sounding board of someone who is in the trenches with you. You can talk about students or policies, and they listen and agree. You have that friendship with someone who gets it and understands where you are coming from. Some of us have younger kids who are closer in age, and you understand what they are going through. They can tell you things will get better."

"This office is more like a family than just an office. Not to say you don't get pissed off at someone over something sometimes. They know it when you do. But, they have been there for you through a lot."

"Those who have been here longer feel like a family. That is why I like working here. Everyone understands things that happen in life, and they don't treat you badly when things happen and you can't be here. That's why I have stayed."

INS-3. Participants considered friendships valuable within the office and a feasible way to boost morale. The group described the office as a family who worked together to get a job done. One participant stated that friendships could become a problem if cliques developed and some felt excluded.

"Not unless it gets to an extreme where people are excluded. I have seen cliques in other offices. You are either in or you are not. But, I don't feel like here that is a problem, but it could be depending on the atmosphere of the office."

"We are like a family."

INS-4. The participant described the office as a "big family" in which everyone was "pretty close friends." She said this attitude really boosted morale, because it was a natural fit for teamwork. Her comments follow.

"It's big for our morale because we can lean on each other, we are running late or something happens, we can help each other. We are willing to cover for us when needed."

3.d: Other?

Question 13: What other types of motivators are used by the management team to boost morale? Explain.

INS-1. This group did not feel motivators were used within the office. Additional probing questions were asked to facilitate discussion. The group stated the management team had limited opportunities to motivate because of turnover and constant change.

They believe those with children at home would rather be at home in the evenings, whereas, those with grown or no children would be more likely to meet after work. For Christmas parties, one person mentioned her previous office adopted a charity and did Secret Santa. However, others were concerned that some coworkers may not be able to afford items to participate.

"I think overall people want to be with their families. We want to go home. I would rather go home than stay after hours for a party."

"We do Secret Santa, but some people don't want to participate because of the expense. Some people in the office can't afford it."

"If you do things for your church or other groups, you feel like you can't afford to give to a charity. I think not doing much at Christmas time is good, because it allows people to finish up things and leave for the break."

INS-2. The management employs several unique leadership strategies to boost morale, including silly string, mustaches, punch balls, Frisbees, and food days. The office also celebrates holidays; Halloween was acknowledged as a major motivator. Local children tour the entire building to see the costumes and look at the décor. Christmas is not as widely celebrated as an office, because employees are eager to leave for breaks and want to spend time with family.

"The entire building competes for Halloween. Each office has a theme. We had a retired VP come back this year to judge. Little kids come to trick or treat. It has changed our image in the university. Kids are hearing about it, and they come just to see it. The local daycare brings kids to trick or treat on every floor."

“Christmas tends to be close to a busy time, and everyone is trying to get out for break.”

“The supervisor buys pizza for everyone working late.”

INS-3. Participants discussed food day in detail. One enjoyed it; however, the majority said food day caused stress when trying to cook or decide what to bring. Most enjoyed going to lunch as an office or preferred having lunch supplied. The discussion pointed to food as a major motivator within the office. Others commented on the flexibility offered when using vacation time. The campus also was mentioned as a source of high morale, because everyone enjoyed having time to walk on campus when taking a break. Comments follow.

“Our leaders encourage us to go out and walk, or whatever, and take that break. And, the atmosphere is so pretty. It’s always been one of my favorite things.”

“I appreciate how this office has flexibility in the way we can use our time. I know a lot of offices, especially outside of here, where you don’t have that option. That means a lot.”

“The Halloween party was a good motivator. It allows us to have fun together and enjoy each other’s company. It shows management wants to have fun, too.”

“I liked the little lunches we’ve done when people have left. It is hard to visit at restaurants and get to know others because it is loud. But, it is a nice way to get together as a group.”

“Food day is sometimes hard for some of us to handle, when we have so many other nighttime activities. But, having it brought to us or going out is nice, and we don’t have to figure out what to bring. It gets stressful when trying to prepare something.”

INS-4. The main motivator used by management is the alternate work schedule. However, the participant said the office has food days that the staff enjoy. In addition, the office holds monthly meetings to share problems and discuss new initiatives.

Research Question 4. What work environment leadership strategies promote high morale among office staff:

4.a: Teamwork?

Question 14: What is your sense of how teamwork affects morale within the office?

INS-1. The group addressed teamwork in previous comments and expressed that it helped boost morale when stuffing diplomas to mail to recipients. This group felt they did not exhibit much teamwork and stated that the office was not cross-trained. One participant described her relationship with her supervisor as teamwork.

"My team is my boss. I feel like I can go to her if a problem arises. She has never made me feel stupid. She is right there to help me do it. It makes me feel confident. That affects my work. If I thought I couldn't ask a question, I might just start trying on my own, and that wouldn't be good."

INS-2. Recognizing that busy times may cause low morale, the office uses group calendars to be aware of deadlines in other areas. This allows coworkers to quickly recognize those who may need assistance. Student workers also are shared among areas to reduce individual workload and, therefore, reduce stress.

"With the busy times that stagger throughout, sometimes we share student workers if our work for them is not top priority. You get to know the highs and lows of different areas."

INS-3. Teamwork was discussed in terms of cross-training and supplying help in busy times. One participant indicated that those with low morale are not as willing to help others. Another said that those with low morale may view helping others as not a part of their responsibility.

"Attitudes are contagious. Those who don't care are not willing to give assistance to help with a team effort."

"I've worked in an office where the work is your responsibility. And, you never would help that person out because it was not your job or responsibility. I think the office works well together here. Even if it isn't in their title, they are willing to help each other out when they need it."

"In my area, we are always plagued with super-huge projects. If it falls during a slow time, people trickle over and pitch in."

INS-4. Teamwork was discussed in great detail, including commencement and cross-training. The participant said, "Teamwork is very important, especially here because we have such a great volume of work that comes through this office. When you get too much laid on your plate, it can get overwhelming. It's great to have other people trained who can step in and lighten the load."

Question 15: How does your office promote teamwork?

INS-1. This group did not feel the office promoted teamwork. Each talked about completing tasks individually. During the conversation, some participants were surprised to learn of the others' work responsibilities. Once again, stuffing diplomas was mentioned; however, the group explained that it is the only instance of teamwork. Comments follow.

"We are very segmented. I don't feel like I really have a team. I feel like I am on an island by myself. When I think of teamwork, I think of diplomas. Last year, we had grade changes that had to be entered, and some of us stepped up to help."

"I feel like there are very few things that we do together."

INS-2. Participants said teamwork is mandatory and encouraged from the first day of employment. The entire office helps roll scrolls for commencement and take care of office housecleaning. Teamwork is required by making it a mandatory component of the job. Comments follow.

"I don't care how many degrees you have or whether you are royalty. Around here we help staple or clean out the refrigerator. If we can, we will stop what we are doing and help other people."

"When you are hired, you are told what your main duties are. In our training, you are basically told how your job interacts with the other areas. You need to see the whole picture."

INS-3. Since teamwork is beneficial in the office, the researcher questioned how teamwork is promoted. The group focused their comments on cross-training. If someone is out of the office, another can do the needed job. Cross-training was the main source of teamwork in the office.

"I like that the majority of us are cross-trained in any area so we can help."

"If we have to, we can go to different areas to seek help."

"The majority of us are so cross-trained that, if somebody was out, we could pick up the slack. Or, if they are overwhelmed, maybe at the end of term, we've stuck around to put transcripts in envelopes to get them sent."

INS-4. The participant said cross-training is a new concept in the office; however, training others to serve as backups has certainly boosted morale. She said teamwork is part of being friends , and she concluded her thought with the following: “We run by the philosophy that if you aren’t busy, but see someone else that is, try to step in and help them. That’s part of us being friends. We know who needs what.”

4.b: Empowerment?

Question 16: How are decisions made if the management team is away or unavailable (i.e., KACRAO)?

INS-1. The group was hesitant when answering questions about making decisions without talking to the direct supervisor. One participant finally said that everyone would have to email or call their supervisor rather than making a decision. Everyone nodded in agreement.

INS-2. The group expressed confidence in making decisions, while using caution, without supervisors present. The management team was very supportive and trusted individuals to be experts in their positions. The participants attributed worker knowledge to proper training. Comments follow.

“The great thing about the one we have now is, she will say we are properly trained so she will let us do the job. If there is a problem, we will fix it. No one here is afraid to make a decision. We always want to help the student.”

INS-3. The participants felt capable of making some minor decisions when the leadership team is away. They stressed the use of discretion. One indicated she has to tell students to come back later, if a decision cannot be made immediately. Another said she offers the appeal process as an option.

"We use discretion. We don't want to hold up a student. We may have to tell them to come back later."

"If it was something that could be done, we would say yes. But, we might not be able to actually do it immediately."

"We would recommend the appeal process. We know where the lines are. We know what is a big deal and what is not."

INS-4. The participant said staff feel empowered to make decisions when leaders are away. She felt leadership would be supportive and helpful if an incorrect decision was made in their absence.

Question 17: To what extent would office morale increase if the staff felt empowered to make certain decisions?

INS-1. Again, the group was hesitant to answer this question. One participant stated that she believed her supervisor would support her if she made the wrong decision. Others did not comment.

"It's very important. I feel like if I did something wrong, my supervisor would say let's make it right. I wouldn't feel the world ended."

INS-2. Staff felt empowered to make decisions, and emphasized that micromanagement was not used. When it was used, in the past, morale suffered. They emphasized the importance of a leader who cares about the decisions in the office. Leaders are encouraged to ensure proper training is administered to enable decisions that are made in the best interests of students.

"We've been under a lot of different people over the years. Some micromanaged. Then, you get those who don't want any responsibility and they don't care."

INS-3. Limited discussion was held, as all felt they were empowered to make decisions to a certain extent. They felt some must be made by supervisors.

INS-4. The participant said the office is empowered to make decisions, although they are shaped by clear guidelines and regulations enforced by the office. The participant said, "I feel like I can answer any question and be backed up by my superiors. We have guidelines and regulations, and we stick to our guns."

4.c: Praise?

Question 18: What is your sense of the effectiveness of praise as related to morale?

18.a: Verbal?

INS-1. Everyone agreed verbal praise was appreciated and enjoyed hearing from their supervisor that they had done a good job. If they offered to help with a task, they appreciated hearing thank you.

INS-2. The group agreed that verbal praise was most effective in boosting morale, as the acknowledgement indicated that the staff member was appreciated and needed. They felt verbal praise was related to self-worth.

"It helps to have someone to say thank you for doing something, even if it is part of your job."

INS-3. Praise was discussed as a way to increase morale. One participant commented that verbal praise gave her confidence and made her want to challenge herself. Another noted that praise makes people feel good about themselves, regardless of length of employment.

"I think praise is a positive thing. The more praise, the more confident we feel about things we are doing; that makes us want to challenge ourselves by taking on more tasks."

"Praise makes you feel good because someone took notice that you did a good job. Everyone needs a reminder every once in a while. Even if you have been here 10 years, it is nice to hear."

INS-4. The participant said verbal praise boosts morale and pointed to encouragement as a source of morale, particularly when given by a supervisor. Feedback was discussed as well. Her comments follow.

"I have a supervisor that will come in and, once a month, will ask where are we at and what are we doing. And, he will give me encouragement by telling me I am moving along great. He gives me feedback and lets me know how we are doing. That does build you up and keep you going."

18.b: Nonverbal?

INS-1. Nonverbal praise also was appreciated; however, the group was divided on its importance. Half felt hearing praise affirms the person; however, the others believed the receipt of a private email was rewarding.

"I like to have it in writing, so I can go back to it. Then, if you are having a bad day you can go back to it."

INS-2. This group felt nonverbal praise was appreciated less than verbal praise. Therefore, discussion was limited. All felt staff would rather hear praise than receive a pat on the back.

INS-3. The majority of the group preferred nonverbal praise characterized as email. However, one participant said she associated praise with smiles. If individuals are happy, she believes morale will be high.

INS-4. The participant said staff performed better when in a good mood. Her comment is below.

"One gesture might brighten your day and change your mood, so you are in a better mood. You perform better when you are in a good mood."

Question 19: When should management praise staff members?

INS-1. The group felt praise was very important; however, they did not feel it should be constant. All agreed that too much praise would cause individuals to become complacent. They also believed that one individual should not be praised for a project on which a group worked. Comments follow.

"If they did it all the time, I would take it for granted."

"An individual may have been pointed out in a staff meeting. And, even though, I am not involved. I know that others are doing the job in addition to the one person recognized. I wonder how that person is feeling. The supervisor may not know. If I am thinking that way, that person must feel that way."

INS-2. The participants agreed praise would be worthless if given all the time. One stated that too much would cause employees to believe it is not genuine. Another stated that unexpected praise mattered most.

"If they do it all the time, it's not worth anything. When it is unexpected, that is when it means the most."

INS-3. The group agreed praise should not be given daily. Instead, it should be given for the deeds that go above and beyond the call. Comments were limited.

INS-4. The participant believed praise should be given when warranted; however, it should not be given regularly. If given on a regular basis, it will not serve its intended purpose.

4.c: Other?

Question 20: What other leadership strategies are used by the management team to improve morale in your office? Please explain.

INS-1. Limited responses were provided for this question. One participant felt their leadership did nothing to improve morale. However, this was attributed to turnover and constant change.

INS-2. The leadership strategies in the office tend to revolve around fun in the workplace. Using strategies learned at the Kentucky Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (KACRAO), the office introduced silly string, once-a-month birthday parties, after hour dinners, talk like a pirate day, and team building exercises during staff meetings.

INS-3. The group indicated the leadership's style was not one of micromanagement, which when showing trust toward employees, was beneficial in maintaining high morale. In addition, the group appreciated the acknowledgement of the leadership team. Comments follow.

"I like how the registrar comes by and sticks her head in and says, 'Hi.'" She acknowledges that we are there."

"That is a plus that at least she acknowledges that we are alive and here."

"They trust you with things and they trust what you do. They have your back. They might check what you do. But, I like when they come to you directly and tell you something should be done a certain way."

"They know you are going to do the jobs and, if you have questions, they know you will come ask."

INS-4. The participant could not identify other leadership strategies used to boost morale.

Research Question 5. To what extent does office morale create a barrier toward meeting the office mission?

Question 21: Where can you locate your office mission?

INS-1. The participants laughed when the researcher asked about the office mission. Three did not believe the office had a mission statement. One knew the office had a mission statement, but she could not remember where it was located. Another participate did not believe in an office mission, regardless of whether a mission existed.

"I don't put much emphasis on a written mission. I think you should just get your job done and do it the best you can while treating people nicely."

INS-2. The participants were unsure where to find the office mission. One speculated that it probably was in the student handbook. Others pondered in silence.

INS-3. Discussion was limited, as participants were unable to articulate the mission statement or knew where it was located. Some speculated that it is on the website or in an office manual.

INS-4. Discussion was limited. The participants said the office had no mission statement. Rather, they follow the university's mission statement.

Question 22: What are the key components of your office mission or what do you believe should be part of the mission?

INS-1. Since the group was unaware of a mission statement, they were asked to identify what they perceived to be important components of such a statement. They listed the following components: focus more on retention, graduate students, collaborate with others.

INS-2. One participant felt the mission should include a statement on services offered to students, faculty, and the community. In addition, she emphasized the office's positive impact on the lives of the students served, which is accomplished through transcripts and posting of degrees.

INS-3. The group was asked to identify key components of a mission statement, and the following was provided: great customer service, high level of work and accuracy, and professionalism.

INS-4. The participant listed adequate customer service as a component of a mission statement, along with completion of work in a timely manner. Finally, she felt the office should serve as a support system to help students achieve a degree.

5.a: Customer Service?

Question 23: How do you perceive staff morale affects customer service?

INS-1. Discussion was limited, as one participant believed morale affected customer service 100% of the time. Everyone agreed.

INS-2. The group associated low morale with unfriendly behavior when dealing with customers. The participants stressed that coworkers are encouraged to put a "positive spin" on seemingly negative responses. If coworkers experience low morale, the group believed a positive attitude would be difficult.

"It is difficult for people to pretend they are happy. And, it may be difficult to stay nice to people who aren't so nice."

"We train a lot on, 'Don't say not but rather say what we can do.'"

"Strangers can pick up on whether or not you are happy in your job. Sometimes they can't determine whether you are having a bad day because of personal reasons, or you are upset at work or the university."

"I think our group is good about looking at these kids like they are our own. We try to remember that not only might they get an answer they might not like; we know the answer could affect the student in a bad way."

INS-3. The group felt morale affected customer service. One participant indicated that when morale is low, customer service will be lacking. Another said when morale is high, workers are more patient and willing to go the extra step to help students. Comments follow.

"I feel like you give worse customer service when morale is low."

"If your morale is good and you are happy, you are in a better frame of mind and will be more patient and go the extra step."

INS-4. The participant believed coworkers with low morale sometimes forget that their unhappiness or negativity shows. However, she understood it might be hard to pretend to be happy when having a bad day. Despite this, she believed the employee must put the student first and feelings last.

“If you are having a bad day, sometimes that comes across. If you aren’t happy, that comes across to students. You have to remove yourself. When the student comes in, they are number one and they don’t need to know you are having a bad day. Each person needs to be able to separate things that are bothering them or making them unhappy while at work and put the student first no matter what.”

Question 24: To what extent does high morale provide better quality customer service?

INS-1. Since the group believed morale always affected customer service, the participants were asked to discuss how high morale increased work quality. The group agreed that a student may receive adequate help, even though the employee is not friendly. The group seemed to feel that helping a student is a priority over friendliness.

“We have someone who might seem dry, but she is going to give you exactly what you need. The student may not think they are friendly, but the student got what they needed.”

INS-2. The participants discussed challenges with students and parents and how their morale helped offer quality customer service. Parents often ask many questions when their children enter college, and the participants stressed that their office is willing to talk with parents to ease fears and concerns. In addition, high morale helps when dealing with international students who ask frequent questions.

“Parents are sending their child miles away. They are worried about how their child will be welcomed and perceived when they have a problem, because they aren’t going to be there to help. So, I offer to be their room mom. If they have a problem, they can come see me. I will get them to the right person, or we will work on it.”

"The international students have a different connotation of what we are telling them. We diligently work with Saudi Arabian students. We attend their organizational meetings; we explain why we have to do things a certain way."

INS-3. High morale was linked to quality customer service. Participants felt that attitudes are contagious. Happy and helpful employees help reduce negative attitudes emitted from unhappy students. One participant said those with high morale are more likely to find the answer for a student or point the student in the correct direction. Comments follow.

"You may make that customer feel a whole lot better than when they walked in. They may have had a negative attitude, but with your personality and things you are doing, maybe they will leave with a different attitude instead of negatively."

"I think students are relieved that they got an answer to their question and they know they can come back. They've got someone they can come back to and ask. Even if it is not your area, you can put them in the right direction."

INS-4. The participant said quality customer service included putting the student's needs above feelings. Employees with high morale were more willing to help students and coworkers and went above and beyond their job description, whereas, those with low morale simply completed their job.

5.b: Retention?

Question 25: How does morale within your office relate to retention efforts at your institution?

INS-1. The group felt the registrar's office plays a role in the retention of students. Even though they felt helping a student was a priority over friendliness, they admitted that friendliness was linked to the retention of students. In addition, they felt passing students on to other offices could be linked to retention.

"A person can walk in and think a person is snobby; and if she is already thinking about going someplace else, that might be what helps make the decision."

"They may want to get something taken care of, and they can't get the right customer service. So, they may just give up, because we suggested she go talk to someone else."

INS-2. The participants believed they are the front line that frequently deals with students and parents. One stated that when a student receives poor customer service, he or she may not return to the office. The office is integral to the student's success; therefore, if the front line provides negative service, the student may choose to go elsewhere to get the needed support.

"If we are short with a student or parent, they aren't going to come back."

"We have more interaction with current students than other offices, because we are involved in their registration, transcripts, and audits. We have so many different times that students come to the office that, if they continually have bad experiences or feel like they are being constantly pushed out the door or not being helped, then why stay?"

INS-3. Once again, high morale was associated with being helpful. One participant said students are encouraged to remain at the university when employees make every effort to help address their issues. Another said those with high morale are more willing to walk students through a process on the computer. Comments follow.

"If you are willing to help the student, then they are more willing to do what they need to do and not just give up. If they are just lacking three hours, they may want to give up; but if you are willing to give them different options like, let's see if this works or let's see if this works, I think that is better for them."

"Sometimes they call in, and it might take 10 minutes for me to talk with them and talk them through how to look at their unofficial transcript. You know they are on the computer doing what you are telling them to do. They appreciate that."

INS-4. The participant linked morale with helpfulness. She stated that students who felt they had been helped were more likely to remain at the institution. She also remarked on staff members who show their pride in the institution by wearing university attire. Exhibiting pride in the institution encourages students to stay and develop the same pride.

"People want to come here and stay here because they see people are happy and willing to help."

5.c: Job completion?

Question 26: What is your sense about the quality of work of employees with high morale?

INS-1. The general consensus from this group was that employees with low morale will not produce quality work. One participant commented that, when employees begin to not care and plan a departure from the office, they do not care about work quality.

INS-2. Most of the participants felt morale was linked to job completion. One felt individuals may be able to complete a task as directed, even with low morale. Others felt an unhappy employee may rush through the work to simply get it finished, while forsaking quality.

"I think, overall, that is true in all aspects of life. If you feel like it's not going to matter, you might want to do your best for pride, but you don't check your work. You might not stop and think about how it will affect someone else."

INS-3. Opinions were divided regarding job completion and morale. Two participants felt morale did not affect accuracy; however, others felt more effort was demonstrated by those with high morale. Comments follow.

"I think that comes with how crazy of a day you are having and you are trying to do a whole lot of things and have missed something. I don't think morale affects accuracy."

"I think if you have a better morale, you are willing to give more effort. If not, you just do what you have to do to get it done."

INS-4. The participant believed morale did not affect quality. However, she believed low morale would affect the quantity of work produced. A person could have high morale but poor quality work, because the person does not understand the position.

Question 27: What is your sense of morale and its relationship with staff members pride in work?

INS-1. The participants linked this question to quality and stated that morale was linked to care. Therefore, if someone had low morale and felt personally worthless or that the job was worthless, pride diminished.

INS-2. Participants discussed this briefly, and agreed that an employee shows greater pride when morale is high. They believed pride in one's work was linked to understanding the importance of the job and reduced stress levels.

INS-3. One participant agreed that high morale led to pride in work and emphasized that pride and high morale boost confidence. All agreed that those with high morale would exhibit a greater amount of pride in helping students or completing a task.

INS-4. The participant stated that those who do a good job and cope with the work load would most likely have higher morale. Those who struggle with the work and feel depressed might not take pride in the work. Her comment follows.

"If you are getting things done well and know you are doing a great job, I feel like your morale is higher. If your morale is down and you feel like you are struggling, you will have less pride in the work."

Participant Background Questionnaire

The participant background questionnaire was distributed to collect demographic information and to show any significance between demographics and work factors affecting morale, as well as motivators used to boost morale. The original methodological plan was to use the Pearson Chi-Square; however, a low sample size (< 20) forced the use of Fisher's Exact Test. The Fisher's Exact Test allowed the researcher to determine which work factors and motivators significantly impacted age groups or those within the range of years of experience. The Pearson Chi-Square was included to show the unreliable results based on the small sample size.

Research Question 6. To what extent do demographic factors relate to the questions above?

The background questionnaire requested the participant's gender, age, years of experience, degree level, and morale level. Several demographic factors proved too minimal to conduct significance tests. All participants were female; therefore, an analysis based on gender was not required. Of the participants, 11 held baccalaureate degrees, one had an associate degree, and two held a graduate-level degree. Therefore, degrees were not used to determine significance. Four participants identified as having low morale; therefore, this group was not used to determine significance. However, years of experience and age were used in determining significance.

Age Groups. The mean was 45 years of age. Therefore, participants were divided into two age groups: Age Group 1: ≥ 45, and Age Group 2: ≤ 44 (Table 1). Each participant's comments were coded to reflect frequency of comments relating to the following work environment factors and motivators: length of employment, communication, praise, peak work periods, slow work periods, monetary rewards, alternate work schedules, friendships, food days, teamwork, and empowerment.

Open communication and praise were constant across age groups, indicating that 100% felt these items boosted morale. The groups preferred frequent office meetings to address concerns and to learn about new responsibilities, policies, or news within the university. Both nonverbal and verbal praise were cited as an inexpensive way to boost morale. While different age groups appeared to prefer different motivators and were affected by different work environments factors, the Fisher's Exact Test found no significance between age groups. The Chi-Square produced unreliable results when the two groups were equally divided ($p <. 05$), such as friendships and teamwork.

Years of Experience. The mean of this group was 10 years of experience.

Participants were divided into two groups: Years of Experience: ≥ 10 and Years of Experience: ≤ 9 (Table 2). Each participant's comments were coded to reflect frequency of comments relating to the following work environment factors and motivators: length of employment, communication, praise, peak work periods, slow work periods, monetary rewards, alternate work schedules, friendships, food days, teamwork, and empowerment.

Similar to the age groups, open communication and praise were constant for all years of experience. The Chi-Square produced unreliable results when the two groups were equally divided ($p < .05$), such as length of employment, friendships, and teamwork. The most notable difference was the various opinions on how length of employment affects morale, based on the different groups established through years of experience.

Table 1

Work Environment Factors and Impact on Morale by Age Groups

	Age Group 1: ≥ 45		Age Group 2: ≤ 44			
	Affects Morale	Does Not Affect Morale	Affects Morale	Does Not Affect Morale	Fisher's Exact Test Value	Chi-Square Value
Length of Employment	4	3	6	1	.559	1.400
Praise	7	0	7	0	-	-
Communication	7	0	7	0	-	-
Peak Work Periods	2	5	4	3	.592	1.167
Slow Work Periods	2	5	1	6	1.000	.424
Monetary Rewards	7	0	6	1	1.000	1.077
Alternate Work Schedules	4	3	6	1	.559	1.400
Friendships	5	2	5	2	1.00	.000
Food Day	2	5	4	3	.592	1.167
Teamwork	5	2	5	2	1.00	.000
Empowerment	2	5	3	4	1.00	.311

Table 2

Work Environment Factors and Impact on Morale by Years of Work Experience

	Years of Experience: ≥ 10		Years of Experience: ≤ 9			
	Affects Morale	Does Not Affect Morale	Affects Morale	Does Not Affect Morale	Fisher's Exact Test Sig.	Chi-Square Value
Length of Employment	5	2	5	2	1.00	.000
Praise	7	0	7	0	-	-
Communication	7	0	7	0	-	-
Peak Work Periods	2	5	4	3	.592	1.167
Slow Work Periods	2	5	1	6	1.00	.424
Monetary Rewards	6	1	7	0	1.00	1.077
Alternate Work Schedules	4	3	6	1	.559	1.400
Friendships	5	2	5	2	1.00	.000
Food Day	2	5	4	3	.592	1.167
Teamwork	5	2	5	2	1.00	.000
Empowerment	2	5	3	4	1.00	.311

Summary

Through the use of a qualitative study, focus groups were conducted at four registrar's offices, chosen because of similar organizational structure and responsibilities. Demographic information was collected through a background questionnaire during the focus group study. Fourteen staff members agreed to participate in the study, resulting in a low sample size. Data was coded to determine emerging themes related to work environment and morale boosters. Comments were coded by age group and years of experience to develop frequencies.

The focus group sessions were approximately one hour in length. Questions from the interview guide were directly related to each research question, as noted in the

Findings section. Participants were candid during the discussions, and significant responses were included in the Findings section. Crosstabs were then conducted on the motivators and work environment factors, based on the participant age group and years of experience.

Cross tabulations concluded praise and open communication were constants and boosted morale for all participants. The researcher attempted to use a Chi-Square to determine significance; however, the sample size was not large enough to produce reliable results. Therefore, the Fisher's Exact Test was utilized to test for significance and was found to be not obvious between the established groups. The most notable difference between the two groups was that more participants who had fewer years of experience believed length of employment impacted morale. Similar comments were documented in the qualitative portion, where participants remarked that older employees were likely to have lower morale. Some also surmised older employees were more likely to suffer from compassion fatigue or were unwilling to change as office responsibilities shifted. The groups discussed food days; however, some felt these rewards were a hassle. None of the participants were able to relate the office mission to the researcher. Teamwork was deemed important in three institutions, particularly through cross-training. The majority of participants felt quality customer service was linked to morale and believed the Office of the Registrar played a vital role in the retention of students through the customer service offered.

CHAPTER V: DISCUSSION

The Study in Brief

The Office of the Registrar is the oldest administrative unit in higher education facilitates registration, enforces the policies of the university, maintains student records, and posts credentials on official transcripts. The historical context pertaining to the Office of the Registrar was discussed in Chapter I. Quann (1979) described the primary functions of the Office of the Registrar as the oversight of registration, grade reporting, record keeping, transcripts, certification, and catalog preparation. These responsibilities are crucial for the prosperity of the university. Accuracy is necessary within the office; Blaney (2009) linked accuracy with student persistence or retention in higher education. Therefore, the registrar's office must produce quality work, while providing customer service for faculty, staff, students, and the community.

Research in higher education has not focused on the morale of support staff within the Office of the Registrar, even though these individuals work directly with students, faculty, and staff. The staff within the office are considered frontline workers, as they often are the first point of contact for students with questions (Fifolt, 2010). Morale studies in higher education have focused on the faculty or mid-level managers (Ngambi, 2011; Rosser, 2004; Bryson, 2004). The present study is significant for registrars interested in job functions that lower morale and who are searching for effective motivators. Money was excluded as an effective motivator, because the frequency that is required would be economically impossible. Instead, leadership strategies were explored, and participants were asked to discuss the Office of the Registrar's role in the retention of students.

Methodology

This study used a small sample size drawn from four public institutions with similar organizational structure. Focus groups were utilized at three of the institutions, and a semi-structured interview was conducted at one institution. The interview guide is located in Appendix E. In addition, a background questionnaire was administered to collect demographic information on participants (Appendix F). The goal of the focus groups and background questionnaire was to answer six empirical research questions. The duration of the focus groups was approximately 60 minutes at each institution.

Both instruments were reviewed by two experts in the field and one methodologist. Revisions were made to improve the questions and reduce the length of the interview guide. After receiving approval for the study from each registrar's office, the researcher received approval from the WKU Institutional Review Board. To ensure a seamless process, a pilot study was conducted using a panel of volunteers. Letters of support were received from five registrars at public institutions, as well as from the President of a state Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers.

The three focus groups and one semi-structured interview were conducted to complete the study. Specific information regarding the methodology was included in Chapter III. The sessions were digitally recorded, and the data were transcribed. Primarily, qualitative data analysis using a grounded theory approach was utilized to determine emerging themes. Qualitative analyses were conducted utilizing the demographic information with the Fisher's Exact Test and Chi Square, to determine the significance of age and years of experience on specific leadership styles and motivators.

Bias Identification

The researcher recognized bias was inevitable in the research study. Creswell (2013) issued a warning relative to research conducted in one's own work environment; participants may not be completely honest with a researcher who works in the same environment. This concern was addressed, which prompted the inclusion of other offices in the study. However, some members of the researcher's work environment were unwilling to participate, because the researcher held a management-level position within the office. As a manager in one of the offices, the researcher possessed had a working knowledge of job functions and strategies used to boost morale and strived to facilitate the discussion, rather than leading them in an attempt to promote candid answers.

Limitations of Study

Limitations were evident in this study. First, the study involved regional registrar offices, which have similar structural and organizational models. The institutions face similar challenges, when attempting to meet retention and graduation expectations set forth by the Council on Postsecondary Education. Therefore, state universities with larger student bodies were not incorporated in this study, because their organizational structures vary from regional institutions. Also, the study focused on non-management staff perceptions of the work environment and did not offer a comparison on how this differs from management's perceptions. This study is qualitative and uses semi-structured focus groups to make generalizations; a quantitative study would have incorporated more staff members on which to base generalizations.

Discussion of Findings

The findings from the focus groups will be discussed in this section, as well as the findings from the background questionnaire. Chapter IV provided the comprehensive results from the focus groups, organized by the interview guide questions. This section will summarize the findings under the specific research questions. All questions are from the perspective of registrar's office staff.

Research Question 1: What is the level of morale in the office?

Discussion. To answer this question, participants identified characteristics of individuals with low or high morale. The overall mood and behavior of an individual were considered key to making a morale interpretation among the staff. Low morale was identified through negative customer service interactions or poor interactions with coworkers. Strank (2005) supported this supposition by saying the following about low morale: "This feeling is reflected in attitudes to management, the job and the organization as a while" (p. 117). High morale was identified through willingness to help others in the office and display of positive attitude, which is supported by Peterson et al. (2008) who noted that morale is evident through "perseverance, courage, resilience, and success" (p. 29).

Workers, who experience a great deal of stress, whether at home or in the workplace, were determined to have low morale. Strank (2005) confirmed finding balance between work and home can cause stress in the workplace and emphasized employees are often required to make choices between the demands of home and work. This stress could lead to conflict, which was evident through verbal and nonverbal communication. Working overtime or spending too much time at work can cause problems at home and lead to conflict when the family member must sacrifice family vacations, eating together, and participating in family activities. Also, family issues such as caring for children, aging parents, or other family members may lower morale at work. This type of internal conflict can lead to negativity in the workplace.

Most of the participants agreed that length of employment was related to low morale. The relationship between length of employment, morale, and change was discussed in great length. Younger employees felt their older counterparts were more likely to have low morale when confronted with change. Reed et al. (2005) agreed that older employees may experience difficulties with change related to new technology.

Research Question 2: To what extent are registrar's office work-related functions related to low morale?

Discussion. In general, the primary job responsibilities for the Office of the Registrar were identified as maintaining student records, athletic certification, degree certification, catalog preparation, room scheduling, VA Certification, determining residency, issuing transcripts, and processing name and address changes. The job responsibilities were aligned with Quann (1979), who described the primary functions of the Office of the Registrar as the oversight of registration, grade reporting, record keeping, transcripts, certification, and catalog preparation.

As many services are provided by the Office of the Registrar, the busy times vary within the divisions in the office. Transcript request areas are busy at the end of the semester; whereas, the registration area is busy at the beginning of the semester. During these times, staff members indicated that morale suffered because of the stress from the workload. Strank (2005) emphasized that busy times at work can cause more workplace errors and diminish quality. One conclusion found from this study suggests that supervisors must consider reducing stress during peak work times. Slower times allow for camaraderie and teamwork to complete massive projects.

Workers noted low morale was a by-product of having to tell students bad news, he or she cannot graduate or does not meet residency requirements. Dealing with negative students with accusatory attitudes also brought morale to a minimum. Baumeister et al. (2001) conducted research and found bad was stronger than good, i.e., humans respond more negatively to negative rather than to positive. Managers must take into account the negative workplace activities, as these interactions will overpower the positive activities.

Research Question 3: How do staff view work environment motivators in relation to morale:

3.a: Monetary awards?

Discussion. All workers felt monetary awards would boost morale. However, some admitted resentment when certain individuals received raises and others did not. This is especially true when a team atmosphere is encouraged. The research revealed monetary awards were an inconsistant morale booster. Participants estimated a raise would be frequently needed to maintain high morale. This finding supports Gellerman’s (1963) summary of The Pittsburg Studies, where money was determined to sustain morale, but not boost morale.

3.b: Alternative work schedules?

Discussion. Alternate work schedules boost morale, according to the majority of participants. While the possibility is currently limited in three offices, one allowed an hour variation. Some workers came in early; some came in late. Those who opted for the alternate schedule were given an hour of time to catch up on work without customer foot traffic. This reduced workplace stress and boosted morale. Those who were unsure about an alternate work schedule were not informed on different options and were opposed to opening the office early or staying open late. Strank (2005) suggested alternate work schedules as a reasonable way to reduce stress, if the work schedule is feasible for the office. Atkinson and Hall (2011) found allowing employees control over their work schedule not only reduced stress, but it increased happiness among workers. Happy employees were more willing to go above and beyond the requirements of the job to serve their customers. Beatty and Burroughs (1999) suggested alternate work schedules are "an attractive benefit for employees at many different stages of their personal and professional lives (p. 599). Rappaport et al. (2003) also noted aging employees would benefit greatly from an alternate work schedule.

3.c: Relationships?

Discussion. Relationships were essential within the office and helped many participants maintain a high morale. The research revealed relationships help individuals find balance between their personal and professional lives. Dike (2012) said leaders who encourage friendships within the office will have "higher productivity, quality, and lower turnover" (p. 193). Sharing experiences with a friend seemed to ease burdens and reduce stress. This finding coincided with the research of Sias and Cahill (1998), who documented employees turn to office friends who share similar life experiences to express frustrations with supervisors, cope with unwanted change, and to discuss personal conflicts at home. The participants described the office as a family, which helped deal with internal conflict. As with families, the offices with high morale tended to resolve conflicts quickly so that business could continue as normal. Participants unknowingly were following the advice of Tjosvold et al. (1992), whose research emphasized the appropriate management of conflict was "central to the basic mission of the organization," because the method used to address the conflict directly relates to the outcome and the customer service provided.

3.d: Other?

Discussion. The research included other motivators used by managers to boost morale, including food and holiday celebrations. Staff enjoy celebrating special occasions such as Halloween. Food was not mentioned as a motivator around "family-heavy" holidays such as Thanksgiving or Christmas. During these seasons, staff members preferred finishing work quickly to get home where preparations could be made for family commitments. Food days were mentioned as a source of stress for some, who felt deciding on the perfect dish was an unwanted challenge. Simply having lunch together provided greater motivation than being expected to bring food for everyone. Farrant (1990) suggested a break room for employees to eat together or spend leisure time while at the office.

Research Question 4: What work environment leadership strategies promote high morale among office staff:

4.a: Teamwork?

Discussion. Teamwork was promoted in most work environments and was cited as a leadership strategy used to boost morale. Cross-training was deemed a valuable asset and reduced stress within three of the offices. Staff members expressed relief in knowing critical job functions would be completed in their absence, which helped to provide balance between home and work. The teamwork discussion was grounded in Preinkert's (2005) thoughts, in which she stated, "Continuity of employment is more important in the registrar's office than in most other offices in the institution, especially in the key positions" (p. 9). In addition, Quann (1979) noted that the registrar has "major duties and tasks to perform that cannot be delayed or tabled" (p. 128). These thoughts are relevant when large offices have staff members who must complete necessary job functions for the university. Cross-training promotes continuity of employment and ensures essential functions will continue when employees must be absent. Farrant (1990) suggested rotating jobs to build morale within the office.

4.b: Empowerment?

Discussion. Participants were uncomfortable making decisions within the office; therefore, empowerment was not discussed as a means to boost morale. All felt a responsibility to consult a supervisor before making minor decisions. Porterfield (2003) listed this as a characteristic of micromanagement; the present study showed the group did not feel they were micromanaged. However, the group felt, if a decision had to be made without a supervisor's consent, the decision would be supported by mid-level managers. The undergraduate catalog was identified as a tool to help in making decisions. One participant felt decisions were easy to make, since the Office of the Registrar was charged with enforcing approved policy. Her position was the following: "We have guidelines and regulations and we stick to our guns."

Despite this, the research indicated that individuals did not feel micromanaged, and participants voiced negative comments about micromanagement in the workplace. Staff members felt those who micromanaged lacked trust in the staff. This sentiment also was documented in Fracaro's (2007) research, in which he said micromanagement would impact the trust between employees and the employers. He emphasized those who feel micromanaged will eventually show a decline in productivity and will be unwilling to make sacrifices for the organization.

4.c: Praise?

Discussion. Praise is a powerful method to boost morale. Staff appreciated non-verbal and verbal praise. However, all agreed the praise should match the personality of the individual, and Bell (2010) supported that conclusion. Some preferred to receive praise through email, rather than receiving praise in front of peers. Managers who fail to praise staff will see low morale in the office, as staff feel unappreciated for the work they complete. Robison (2006) indicated humans crave praise; however, the praise should be unexpected. The participants in this research project said praise should not be given constantly, because the value depreciated if given too frequently.

4.d: Other?

Discussion. Leaders who encourage staff members to attend professional development events should expect to see increased morale. These strategies allow staff members to create morale boosters within the office, instead of that responsibility falling on managers. Beatty and Burroughs (1999) found aging employees were more likely to receive less training or professional development than younger employees. Therefore, leaders should take advantage of professional conferences and workshops to boost the morale of all employees.

Research Question 5: To what extent does morale create a barrier toward meeting the office mission?

Discussion. Surprisingly, the research showed none of the participants were able to share components of the office mission. A few participants discussed the university mission; one said that completing her job was fulfilling the mission. When prompted, the participants indicated they believed customer service and the retention of records was a part of the mission. Because employees were unable to discuss or locate the office mission, a commitment gap was found. Bennis and Nanus (2007) suggested closing the commitment gap would motivate employees. Workers should play a role in writing the office vision and mission in order to feel a sense of accomplishment as it is being fulfilled. Furthermore, Bennis and Nanus emphasized, “In order for an organization to have integrity, it must have an identity – that is, a sense of who it is and what it is to do” (p. 47).

5.a: Customer service?

Discussion. Staff recognized customer service as a key component of the office mission and reported those with low morale provided lower quality customer service and caused negative interactions with customers. The registrar’s office is sometimes fraught with students who blame the office when they fail to complete graduation requirements. Staff felt students who are negative or who do not appreciate help cause low morale. Workers who are blamed or treated badly by students are prone to offering suboptimal customer service. Dijulius (2003) discussed boosting morale in customer service settings to create passionate team members. In addition, he surmised frontline workers must provide optimal customer service while juggling several tasks. This is crucial, as they are the face of the office.

5.b: Retention?

Discussion. Participants defined themselves as frontline workers who have the ability to influence students' decisions to remain at the university. When discussing retention, the research revealed the Office of the Registrar felt staff played a vital role in the retention of students. Workers recognized students may make a decision to remain at the institution based on the way they are treated by staff. Employees assumed students preferred not to be directed to other offices and strived to create a small-town or home-like atmosphere to appeal to students and parents. While research in this area is scant, the philosophy is similar to that of workers who deal with negative students. The Baumeister et al. (2001) research found that negative experiences are remembered more readily than positive experiences. The same could be true for customer experiences within the office.

5.c: Job completion?

Discussion. The staff felt morale did not affect job completion. Even those employees with the lowest morale could complete the job; however, they may take limited pride in their work. The participants answered this question from the approach of data entry or processing. Based on previous answers, morale clearly affects customer service. Staff members did not associate job completion with quality customer service. However, Strank (2005) theorized stressful situations would cause poor quality work within the office.

Research Question 6: To what extent do demographic factors relate to the questions above?

6.a: Gender?

Discussion. As all participants were female, this question held no significance for the study. Even though males did not participate, males who work in this female dominated profession may have low morale. As stated earlier, relationships among staff are crucial. Females typically create friendships based on personal similarities, whereas men may find the development of friendships to be a challenge in this female dominated field.

6.b: Age?

Discussion. Using the Fisher's Exact Test, age showed no significance on morale, motivators, or leadership styles. However, younger employees viewed their older counterparts as having lower morale. One of the participants, classified as being older, stated that her morale was low. However, she unhappily remained at the job for the benefits, which included time off and insurance. Rappaport et al. (2003) reported on low morale among older workers who were financially unable to retire. Younger employees would simply leave, if the job caused low morale for an extended period of time. In addition, older employees were less likely to enjoy food days because of the added stress. Those who were younger were more prone to want alternate or flexible work schedule to ease stress at home. All participants indicated open communication and praise were motivators. Therefore, these items were constant, and free, motivators leading to high morale. Weiss (2011) agreed that employees want to be "in the know" (p. 23).

6.c: Educational level?

Discussion. All participants had similar degree types; therefore, this question held no significance for the study. However, those with higher level degrees may display higher morale, as these individuals have more opportunities for advancement.

6.d: Years of service in office?

Discussion. Years of service had no significance based on the Fisher's Exact Test. However, individual results showed those with fewer years of experience were more likely to retain high morale through a change. Those with more experience in the office perceived those with fewer years accepted this change because they were naïve. Those with more years of experience perceived they were able to accept change with high morale, because they had been through more changes than younger employees. All participants said open communication and praise were motivators. Stranks (2005) reported that change is a source of stress in the workplace. He emphasized, "Effective communication is the answer to reducing the stress associated with change" (p. 83). Therefore, communication and praise are free and provide constant motivation for employees to have high morale. Baird and Bradley (1978) stated that an employer's communication strategy with subordinates is correlated with the morale of the office.

Recommendations

Recommendations are in three divisions: Office considerations, university considerations, and suggestions for future research. "Office considerations" provides suggestions to leaders within the Office of the Registrar. "University considerations" provides suggestions for academic and non-academic administrators. The "Suggestions for Future Study" provides ideas for future research within higher education and the Office of the Registrar.

Office Considerations

Leaders within Offices of the Registrar must recognize the existing family paradigm. Staff members require time for socialization to discuss work and personal issues, which will help to find a balance between work and personal life. Female staff members gravitate toward others who have similar backgrounds or family structures. These friendships help with enduring change and conflict.

The family paradigm is important when dealing with office conflict. When employees perceive one another as part of a big family, they are more willing to move past conflict and preventing it from driving the work environment. Similar to family, staff know they must interact with the individual causing the conflict and must make the relationship work for the sake of the family or work environment. Open communication is encouraged to help in overcoming a conflict. Workers may need time to talk through the problem, and leaders must take the conflict seriously.

Support is a component of the family paradigm. Family members often are called upon to fulfill various roles in the absence of others. Similarly, an office should be cross-trained and a teamwork mentality encouraged among staff members. When individuals are sick, take vacations, attend conferences, or must be elsewhere, they should know their job responsibilities will continue. In addition, support will help ease workplace stress during peak times, which were shown to lower morale.

Leaders must recognize the importance of praise in the work environment. Praise is free, and all participants said the effective use of praise would boost morale. Praise should match the personality of the individual and should be warranted. Leaders must remember that those who promote teamwork must praise the entire team, rather than recognizing only the leader of the team. Team members who do not receive equal praise will eventually resent the leader and have no desire to complete future tasks.

In addition to praise, leaders should promote open communication within the office. Potential changes should be discussed thoroughly to ease stress and tension.

Leaders should be open to suggestions from staff who may have new ideas for office procedures or opinions about the work environment. Open communication involves active listening; leaders should listen to staff concerns and problems, whether the issues are related to work or home.

Alternate work schedules should be considered when searching for ways to boost morale. These schedules are practical and effective in boosting the morale of all employees. Office hours can remain normal; however, allowing staff to work alternate schedules promotes trust, which is essential for individuals to feel a sense of belonging. Alternate work schedules can assist those with school-aged children, as well as those with aging parents. An effective Office of the Registrar experiences limited turnover. In an effort to retain employees and eliminate stress, leaders should be open to new concepts relating to schedules, if the university allows such flexibility.

The most significant finding was that none of the participants knew the office mission or where the mission is located. Each listed assumptions concerning the goals of the mission. Staff should actively participate in the creation of an office vision and mission in order to have ownership and to define the meaning of quality within the office. Individuals may have different opinions on quality customer service; therefore, staff should work together to define job responsibilities and expectations for positive customer service experiences. During this research, staff spoke vaguely about what they perceived to be the mission. The most common components were customer service and maintenance of records. However, in later conversations, participants perceived that customer service was linked to the retention of students, which was not mentioned as part of the office mission. Working together to establish a mission would remove silos in the office and encourage coworkers to fully understand the functions of different areas. As mentioned previously, creating an office mission ensure the office has integrity and identity of the office (Bennis & Nanus, 2007).

Attitudes, mannerisms, and interactions are part of customer service. Therefore, leaders must recognize job functions that cause low morale and strive to improve morale during high-demand work times. Food days may cause added stress; therefore, leaders may consider providing food, rather than asking others to bring items. Leaders also should be willing to appoint an individual to coordinate such activities, as they may suffer fatigue from planning morale boosters.

University Considerations

From a university perspective, the importance of the services rendered in the Office of the Registrar is paramount. The office plays a vital role in the mission of the university through enforcing policies, maintaining the course inventories, publishing the undergraduate catalog, graduating students, maintaining class rolls, etc. The morale of the staff also plays a part in the quality of the services. Therefore, administrators must consider similar motivators and leadership styles as those used by mid-level management within the office, such as assistant and associate registrars.

Open communication is a necessity. Change causes stress and lowers morale; however, time can ease the burdens associated with new policies. When the value and experience of the office is considered, the need for discussion when proposing new policies is obvious. Leaders and staff should not be blindsided by new initiatives and policies. When this happens, self-worth is compromised and employees begin to believe they do not matter. This will result in turnover, which is disastrous to an office that flourishes on continuity and an acquired knowledge base, such as a registrar's office.

Praise from administrators is appreciated. Recognition for the completion of necessary functions is a way of boosting morale. Receiving notification of a job well done for working a commencement or another successful publication communicates that their work is appreciated and necessary. This builds employee allegiance to the university.

Future Studies

This study was limited to institutions in the Southeastern region with similar organizational structure and enrollments. Therefore, opportunities for future studies are endless. First, those interested in morale may follow a similar model in their home state to examine morale within a system or among institutions with similar structures and enrollments. Also, morale can be studied in organizations with differing structures to determine which structure promotes the highest morale.

Qualitative research provides a basis for quantitative research. Qualitative studies typically have small sample sizes; therefore, a researcher could develop a survey to administer to the masses. The creation of such a survey would suffice as one research project. In another study, the survey could be administered to collect data. Studies of this magnitude would be interesting at the national level and could be used to develop a list of best practices.

From a student perspective, a morale study could be conducted regarding the level of service received within the Office of the Registrar. The research could be expanded to students who left an institution to determine whether customer service was linked to the decision to leave. Retention studies of this nature could impact customer service training conducted for employees.

Conclusions

This qualitative study was conducted in Offices of the Registrar within the Southeastern region of the United States having similar organizational structure and enrollments. A grounded theory approach was used to conduct three focus groups and one semi-structured interview. A background questionnaire was used to collect demographic information, and themes emerged from coding the data. To determine significance of age and years of experience, a Fisher's Exact Test was utilized in addition to the Chi Square. The Chi Square was insignificant due to the small sample size.

Participants were asked to define an individual with low and high morale. An individual with low morale was defined as not willing to help others; mannerism and interactions also were used to determine low morale. Individuals with high morale were defined as happy and willing to help. Participants reported that morale suffered during peak work times, as staff felt overworked and stressed. Slow times were used to build relationships and promote teamwork within the office.

The offices had similar job functions, which included registration, posting degrees, maintaining records, articulating transfer work, overseeing the course inventory, conducting name and address changes, and other necessary tasks. The entire graduation process was determined to be the highest risk of low morale. Long work days and delivering negative news to hopeful graduates were discussed as negative components of the position.

Relationships, praise, alternate work schedules, attending conferences or professional developments, and open communication were listed as effective ways to boost morale. Relationships included teamwork, cross-training, and friendships. The happiest offices had some degree of teamwork and cross-training. Friendships were helpful in finding balance between personal and work life. Alternate work schedules also were a source of balance between personal and work life; the schedules also encouraged low turnover in the office. Allowing employees to attend conferences or professional development gave them a sense of belonging and built trust. Open communication allowed employees to know they mattered in the decision-making process and helped them prepare for upcoming changes.

None of the participants were aware of the office mission, which illustrated a commitment gap to be addressed. Input in the vision and mission of the office provides ownership to the employee. Despite the participants' inability to recite or identify the components of the office mission, all felt their job was grounded in customer service and influenced the retention of students.

Years of experience and age had no influence on motivators or leadership styles used to boost morale. However, open communication and praise were constant, free motivators that all agreed boosted morale. Leaders within the office and administrators outside of the office should be cognizant of the impact of open communication and the effective use of praise. The possibilities for future studies are limitless, as studies on morale can be conducted in any state using differing institutions. The research could be expanded into a quantitative study to collect more data, with the goal of creating best practices in the field.

This study is significant, in that registrars can begin working toward office improvements to boost morale. A staff with high morale will improve customer service experiences and create a dynamic workforce willing to go beyond the requirements of the position. The office with the lowest morale had different divisions within its structure which operated similar to individual silos. The office provided limited cross-training, and turnover caused uncertainty and tension. The offices with the highest morale defined the work environment as a family, was cross-trained, and non-management staff addressed the task of boosting morale. This study revealed which staff would excel in the statewide initiatives of retention and graduation of students. Happy employees will work together, assist students, and propel the Office of the Registrar to a model within the university.

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APPENDIX A: EXPERT REVIEW OF INTERVIEW GUIDE AND QUESTIONNAIRE

Content Expert Review on Interview Guide for Focus Groups

Please use the following questions as guide to critique my interview guide for the established focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback based on your expertise.

Interview Guide for Focus Group

1. Introduction:
   a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?
2. Format:
   a. Is the interview format clear?
   b. Are the questions clear and understandable?
   c. Does the format flow for a group discussion?
3. Directions:
   a. Are the directions clear and concise?
4. Feasibility:
   a. Is the instrument practical?
   b. Is the instrument too long?
5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format and presentation of the focus group interview schedule?

Staff Perceptions on Morale

6. Are the questions regarding staff opinions on defining an employee with high or low morale appropriate?

Work Related Functions Affecting Morale

7. Are the questions regarding which Office of the Registrar work related functions affect morale appropriate?

Perceived High Morale Motivators

8. Are the questions regarding perceived morale motivators appropriate?

Perceived Leadership Strategies for High Morale

9. Are the questions regarding perceived leadership strategies for high morale clear and appropriate?

Demographic Factors Affecting Morale

10. Are the questions regarding demographic factors affecting morale clear and appropriate?

Morale's Relationship to Dedication

11. Are the questions regarding the perceived relationship between morale and dedication to the office mission clear and appropriate?

Conclusion

12. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group interview guide?

13. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the interview guide?

Thank you for your time!

Content Expert Review on Background Questionnaire for Focus Groups

Please use the following questions as guide to critique my background questionnaire for the focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback based on your expertise.

Background Questionnaire for Focus Group

1. Introduction:
    a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?
2. Format:
    a. Is the questionnaire format clear?
    b. Are the questions clear and understandable?
3. Directions:
    a. Are the directions clear and concise?
4. Feasibility:
    a. Is the instrument practical?
    b. Is the instrument too long?
5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format?

Conclusion

6. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group background questionnaire?
7. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the questionnaire?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX B: METHODOLOGIST REVIEW OF INSTRUMENTATION

Methodologist Review of Background Questionnaire for Focus Groups

Please use the following questions as guide to critique my background questionnaire for the focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback based on your expertise.

1. Introduction:
    a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?
2. Format:
    a. Is the questionnaire format clear?
    b. Are the questions clear and understandable?
3. Directions:
    a. Are the directions clear and concise?
4. Feasibility:
    a. Is the instrument practical?
    b. Is the instrument too long?
5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format?

Conclusion

6. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group background questionnaire?
7. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the questionnaire?

Thank you for your time!

Methodologist Review of Interview Guide for Focus Groups

Please use the following questions as guide to critique the methodological process pertaining to the interview guide for the established focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback based on your expertise.

1. Introduction:

    a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?

2. Format:

    a. Is the interview format clear?

    b. Are the questions clear and understandable?

    c. Does the format flow for a group discussion?

3. Directions:

    a. Are the directions clear and concise?

4. Feasibility:

    a. Is the instrument practical?

    b. Is the instrument too long?

5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format and presentation of the focus group interview schedule?

Conclusion

6. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group interview guide?

7. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the interview guide?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW GUIDE MAPPED TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following questions comprise the Interview Guide for the focus group. Questions are grouped according to the research question they are intended to answer. The empirical research questions are listed in bold. RQ is an abbreviation for the empirical research question.

From the perspective of Registrar's Office Staff:

RQ1: What is the level of morale in the office?

1. How can you recognize if an employee in the office has low morale?
2. What is your sense of how length of employment is related to morale?
3. How does non-verbal communication affect morale of staff? Verbal?

RQ2: To what extent are registrar's office work-related functions related to low morale?

4. What are the primary job responsibilities of your Office of the Registrar?
5. What are the busiest times within the Office of the Registrar?
6. To what extent do you believe morale suffers during peak times? During slow times?
7. What specific required activities within the office cause low morale? High morale?

RQ3: How do staff view work environment motivators in relation to morale:

e. Monetary Awards?

8. To what extent would a monetary award such as a raise or stipend boost morale within the office?
9. How long would it take before the staff would require another monetary award to boost morale?

f. Alternative Work Schedules?

10. What is your perception about an alternative work schedule and its relationship with morale?
11. What types of an alternate work schedule would best boost morale?

g. Relationships?

12. To what extent do you believe staff members who have friendships with other staff members at work have a higher morale?

h. Other?

13. What other types of motivators are used by the management team to boost morale? Explain.

RQ4: What work environment leadership strategies promote high morale among office staff:

e. Teamwork?

14. What is your sense of how teamwork affects morale within the office?

15. How does your office promote teamwork?

f. Empowerment?

16. How are decisions made if the management team is away or unavailable (i.e., KACRAO)?

17. To what extent would office morale increase if the staff felt empowered to make

certain

decisions?

g. Praise?

18. What is your sense of the effectiveness of praise as related to morale?

- verbal?

-nonverbal?

19. When should management praise staff members?

h. Other?

20. What other leadership strategies are used by the management team to improve morale in your office? Please explain.

RQ5: To what extent does office morale create a barrier toward meeting the office mission?

21. Where can you locate your office mission?
22. What are the key components of your office mission?

    d. Customer Service?

23. How do you perceive staff morale affects customer service?
24. To what extent does high morale provide better quality customer service?

    e. Retention?

25. How does morale within your office relate to retention efforts at your institution?

    f. Job Completion?

26. What is your sense about the quality of work of employees with high morale?
27. What is your sense of morale and its relationship with staff members pride in work?

RQ6: To what extent do demographic factors relate to the questions above?

Note: Background questionnaire will serve as a basis for answering this question.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ASSISTANCE!

APPENDIX D: PILOT FEEDBACK ON INTERVIEW GUIDE

Please use the following questions as guide to critique my interview guide for the established focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback as part of a pilot group.

Interview Guide for Focus Group

1. Introduction:
    a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?
2. Format:
    a. Is the interview format clear?
    b. Are the questions clear and understandable?
    c. Does the format flow for a group discussion?
3. Directions:
    a. Are the directions clear and concise?
4. Feasibility:
    a. Is the instrument practical?
    b. Is the instrument too long?
5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format and presentation of the focus group interview schedule?

Staff Perceptions on Morale

6. Are the questions regarding staff opinions on defining an employee with high or low morale appropriate?

Work Related Functions Affecting Morale

7. Are the questions regarding which Office of the Registrar work related functions affect morale appropriate?

Perceived High Morale Motivators

8. Are the questions regarding perceived morale motivators appropriate?

Perceived Leadership Strategies for High Morale

9. Are the questions regarding perceived leadership strategies for high morale clear and appropriate?

Demographic Factors Affecting Morale

10. Are the questions regarding demographic factors affecting morale clear and appropriate?

Morale's Relationship to Dedication

11. Are the questions regarding the perceived relationship between morale and dedication to the office mission clear and appropriate?

Conclusion

12. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group interview guide?

13. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the interview guide?

Thank you for your time!

Pilot Review of Background Questionnaire for Focus Groups

Please use the following questions as guide to critique my background questionnaire for the focus groups comprised of Registrar's Office staff members from regional, public post-secondary institutions. Comments should be typed or written on the form.

The research questions were developed from the literature and theoretical perspective included in Chapter III. If you would like to examine this section, please contact me at 270-438-8685 or email me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu to obtain a digital copy.

Thank you for providing this valuable feedback as part of the pilot group.

Background Questionnaire for Focus Group

1. Introduction:

    a. Is the introductory statement of purpose clear?

2. Format:
    a. Is the questionnaire format clear?

    b. Are the questions clear and understandable?

3. Directions:

    a. Are the directions clear and concise?

4. Feasibility:

    a. Is the instrument practical?

    b. Is the instrument too long?

5. Do you have any general comments or suggestions on the overall format?

Conclusion

6. Do you have any additional thoughts on the overall focus group background questionnaire?

7. Do you have any suggestions concerning questions to add or delete from the questionnaire?

Thank you for your time!

APPENDIX E: INTERVIEW GUIDE

As a group, I am going to ask you a number of open-ended questions that should prompt discussion. Please give your honest opinion regarding your experiences within the Office of the Registrar and your opinion of the work environment factors affecting the morale of coworkers. Respondents and Institutions will be coded to secure identities.

From the perspective of Registrar's Office Staff:

1. How can you recognize if an employee in the office has high or low morale?
2. What is your sense of how length of employment is related to morale?
3. How does non-verbal communication affect morale of staff? Verbal?
4. What are the primary job responsibilities of your Office of the Registrar?
5. What are the busiest times within the Office of the Registrar?
6. To what extent do you believe morale suffers during peak times? During slow times?
7. What specific required activities within the office cause low morale? High morale?
8. To what extent would a monetary award such as a raise or stipend boost morale within the office?
9. How long would it take before the staff would require another monetary award to boost morale?
10. What is your perception about an alternative work schedule and its relationship with morale?
11. What types of an alternate work schedule would best boost morale?
12. To what extent do staff members who have friendships with other staff members at work have a higher morale?

13. What other types of motivators are used by the management team to boost morale? Explain.
14. What is your sense of how teamwork affects morale within the office?
15. How does your office promote teamwork?
16. How are decisions made if the management team is away or unavailable (i.e., at KACRAO, etc.)?
17. To what extent would office morale increase if the staff felt empowered to make certain decisions?
18. What is your sense of the effectiveness of praise as related to morale?

    - verbal?

    -nonverbal?
19. When should management praise staff members?
20. What other leadership strategies are used by the management team to improve morale in your office? Please explain.
21. Where can you locate your office mission?
22. What are the key components of your office mission?
23. How do you perceive staff morale affects customer service?
24. To what extent does high morale provide better quality customer service?
25. How does morale within your office relate to retention efforts at your institution?
26. What is your sense about the quality of work of employees with high morale?
27. What is your sense of morale and its relationship with staff members pride in work?

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ASSISTANCE!

APPENDIX F: BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

As part of this study, this short questionnaire gathers demographic information from Office of the Registrar staff members prior to conducting focus groups at your institution.

Please answer each question by placing an X in the box or filling in the appropriate information on the line.

1. Gender: ☐ Female ☐ Male

2. Institution where employed: ____

3. Age: __________

4. Years of Experience in Registrar's Office: __________

5. Highest degree earned:

☐ High School Diploma

☐ Associate's Degree

☐ Bachelor's Degree

☐ Master's Degree

☐ Other ____

6. Overall, I feel my morale at work is: ☐ High ☐ Low

THANK YOU FOR YOUR TIME AND ASSISTANCE!

APPENDIX G: EMAIL TO POTENTIAL PARTICIPANTS

WKU IRB #: 13-403
Approval Date: June 18, 2013

Hello,

I hope I can solicit your help with my dissertation research through Western Kentucky University. Currently, I am the Assistant Registrar at WKU and the Vice President of Records and Registration for the Kentucky Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. I am very interested in the morale of support staff within the Office of the Registrar. The goal of the research project will be to determine how non-management level staff perceive their work environment affects their morale. The research will be used to inform management level professionals working within the Office of the Registrar on the reported factors affecting the morale of staff including work responsibilities (i.e., commencement, registration, recording transfer work, catalog production, etc.), potential motivators (excluding raises), and demographics. In addition, the study will show how staff perceive morale and its relationship with customer service, retention, and job completion.

This study will be conducted in two parts. First, if you are willing to participate and identify yourself via email, I will send you a background questionnaire to collect demographic information. Focus group participants will be selected based on the demographic information collected. If you are selected, you will be notified via email. I will travel to your campus to conduct the focus group with you and at least three other participants from your office. All information will remain confidential; it will not be shared with your supervisor nor will your name be published as part of the final document.

Please contact me at Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu, if you are interested in participating in the study or have questions about this study. Please note: Your participation is voluntary and all information will remain confidential.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Rheanna Plemons, Doctoral Student
Assistant Registrar, WKU
VP of Records and Registration, KACRAO

APPENDIX H: CONSENT FORM FOR FOCUS GROUP AND BACKGROUND QUESTIONNAIRE

Staff Perceptions of Work-Environment Factors Affecting Morale in Southeastern Registrar's Offices

WKU IRB #: 13-403
Approval Date: June 18, 2013

Investigator: Rheanna Plemons, Assistant Registrar, WKU
(270) 438-8685 / Rheanna.Plemons@wku.edu

Faculty Sponsor: Dr. Janet Applin, Associate Dean for Academic Programs,
(270) 745-4014 / janet.applin@wku.edu

You are being asked to participate in a project conducted through Western Kentucky University regarding a research study to explore the perceived work related factors that affect morale of staff members in the Registrar's Office of regional, post-secondary institutions under the direction of my dissertation chair, Dr. Janet Applin. The University requires that you give your signed agreement to participate in this project. You will be given a copy of this document to keep for your records.

This study is conducted as part of my dissertation project. This research will allow management personnel in the Registrar's Office to understand how staff perceives leadership styles, motivation techniques, and demographics affect morale. In addition, the research will show how staff identifies coworkers with high or low morale and how they interpret the relationship of morale with the office mission including customer service and record retention.

The study includes a focus group session and an online portion designed to assist in analyzing focus groups at the five stated regional institutions. The focus group will last approximately one hour. The instructions for the questionnaire are located at the top of the online document. If you feel uncomfortable answering a question, you should skip the question and move on. You must hit submit at the conclusion of the questionnaire to send responses to the researcher.

Your name or other personally identifiable information will not be published with this study. While total privacy cannot be guaranteed, your privacy will be protected to the fullest extent of the law.

There are no foreseeable risks other than possible answering personal questions. While this information may not be a direct benefit to you, the information you provide may benefit future staff members working in the Registrar's Office.

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary. Refusal to participate in this study will have no effect on any future services you may be entitled to from the

University. Anyone who agrees to participate in this study is free to withdraw from the study at any time with no penalty.

You understand also that it is not possible to identify all potential risks in an experimental procedure, and you believe that reasonable safeguards have been taken to minimize both the known and potential but unknown risks.

____
Signature of Participant Date
____
Witness Date

I would like to audiotape the focus group session; therefore, your permission is required in writing. If you do to wish to be audiotaped, you have the right to leave the study at any time. Tapes will be kept for further analysis and note comparison. I consent to the audio recording of the interview portion of this study. (Initial here)___________

THE DATED APPROVAL ON THIS CONSENT FORM INDICATES THAT
THIS PROJECT HAS BEEN REVIEWED AND APPROVED BY
THE WESTERN KENTUCKY UNIVERSITY INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD
Paul Mooney, Human Protections Administrator
TELEPHONE: (270) 745-2129