Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Value:  
A Qualitative Approach to Identifying Institutional Influences  
  
  
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**Abstract**

Current higher education research explores everything from learning outcomes and classroom technology to shared governance and administrative/faculty dynamics. There is little, if any, research about organization-based self-esteem (OBSE) within this industry and how to leverage its benefits to improve faculty and staff retention and engagement. This qualitative study presents a theoretical model of OBSE institutional factors developed from semi-structured interviews at a small, liberal arts university. Using the Gioia coding method, three key factors influencing OBSE were identified: position ignorance, recognition source, and intergroup relationships. Though OBSE research establishes recognition source as a known variable of perceived value, this paper proposes two new impact sources of position ignorance and intergroup relationships. By finding ways to improve employee OBSE, higher education institutions can create a more engaged population with improved culture.

*Keywords: organization-based self-esteem, OBSE, higher education, academic subcultures, employee recognition, work relationships*

**Faculty and Staff Perceptions of Value:**

**A Qualitative Approach to Identifying Institutional Influences**

Higher education research to date has explored areas such as inequities between faculty and staff (Briggs, 2007; Gill, 2009; Pham & Tanner, 2015), academic culture (e.g., Kuh & Whitt, 1988; Smerek, 2010), tensions between subgroups (Hui-Min, 2009; Skaggs, 2015), and the growing pressure on faculty to do more with less (Selmer, Jonasson, & Lauring, 2013; Turk, 2017). Carroll Graham expands this research area by delving into the staff subculture of academia and their perspectives in at least two articles (2010, 2012).

Though these examples show increasing traction in higher education research, there is minimal work in overall employee satisfaction and engagement within academia. This paper tries to address the gap by building a nascent model that identifies influences on employees’ perception of their value to their institution, or organization-based self-esteem (OBSE). Using a qualitative study, the following research question is explored:

*What are the organizational factors that influence higher education employees’ organization-based self-esteem?*

The original definition of OBSE is used for this study, which is the degree to which an individual believes him/herself significant and worthy as an employee (Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989).

**Methodology**

Eight full-time higher education employees were interviewed using a semi-structured format that focused on storytelling to unearth examples of when the individual felt “valued” by the organization or “appreciated” by colleagues. Interview questions fluctuated between positive and negative story prompts in an attempt to draw out more details on institutional or internal forces. For example, after being asked to describe a time when they felt valued by a colleague, participants would then be asked about at time when they did *not* feel valued. The term OBSE was not used in the interviews to avoid confusion or intimidation from jargon. Instead, questions were intentionally broad and related to areas of known influence on OBSE from existing literature.

Study participants were either full-time faculty or full-time staff. In this study, “staff” represented any non-teaching, full-time employee of the institution and could include individuals in any support department on campus. “Faculty” included full-time employees whose primary responsibility was either teaching or academic research. All participants worked at the same traditional liberal arts institution in the Northeastern United States and had been working in their current position for at least one year. This particular institution prides itself in fostering a collaborative, unified environment for all of campus as part of its mission and core values, which include “respect” and “community.”

The sample intentionally did not include senior personnel, or those classified as “senior administration.” Interviewees included directors, coordinators, full-time faculty, etc. but eliminated any individual at the executive director, chair, or higher title. This was done to control for variants in institution-wide knowledge, more likely associated with employees higher up in the structure and in power. This sampling was also chosen given existing research supporting the concept of ongoing tensions between faculty and senior administration (e.g., Rowland, 2002).

The flexibility of the semi-structured interviews gave rich context for perceptions of recognition and value and added details on the impact of cross-functional relationships and revealed potential cultural differences between faculty and staff.

**Data Analysis**

The Gioia method (Gioia, Corley, & Hamilton, 2012) was used to code interview transcripts, yielding the first-order concepts, second-order themes, and aggregate dimensions represented in Figure 1. After the initial coding, the first-order concepts were thinned in accordance with Whetten’s (1989) recommendations around parsimony and comprehensiveness.

The analysis and subsequent structure resulted in three aggregate dimensions that potentially influence higher education employees’ sense of institutional worth, or OBSE. These are: Position Ignorance, Recognition Source, and Relationships.

**Institutional Influences on OBSE**

The three potential factors are each explored in more detail, using direct interview quotes to support concepts. The only edits to the quotes are those required to maintain anonymity.

**Position Ignorance**

The aggregate dimension of position ignorance is composed of two second-order themes: lack of understanding and communication challenges. Throughout the interviews, participants discussed varying levels of frustration at how little people outside their department understood what their role was within the organization. This frustration bridged both the faculty and the staff interviewed.

For example, one staff member stated,

*Sometimes it's a struggle with some professors see that, "Hey, this is the way I wanna do things." And some staff members are like, "This is the way I wanna work with the student." And sometimes, I see that some don't wanna change their ways but the world is changing, so we have to change.*

Similarly, faculty members discussed frustration with staff not understanding their schedule and the demands on their time. An example of this frustration is the below quote:

*You can find me, but at the same time, in the midst all that, they still don't understand that, "Oh wait, what time do you start again? Oh wait, you don't have to be in the campus 'til two." I'm like, "Yeah. Well, I'll probably get there around 11." "Well why would you get there at 11?" "Because I have stuff I have to read. I have work I need to catch up on.”*

It’s important to note that this disconnect was not limited to faculty-staff interactions, but the cross-functional dynamic did dominate the interviews.

Though “lack of understanding” and “communication challenges” are aligned and possibly overlapping, it’s important to distinguish the two as they may indicate different mental models. Lack of understanding is a general ignorance that can be solved through education. Through education, people can become more enlightened of roles and responsibilities and ignorance can be minimized.

Communication challenges, however, ties into other dimensions highlighted in the data structure. It’s part of an overall theme of separation among areas and individuals, which leads to lack of awareness and perceived interest in what others do to move the institution forward. Statements such as, “blatant ignoring” and “faculty, staff, whatever that divide that sometimes people create between us” may point to a more deliberate cloistering of the individual from the broader workings of an organization.

It’s interesting to note that the employees (both faculty and staff) who interacted the most with people outside their departments or divisions seemed less frustrated by position ignorance. It would be beneficial to explore a possible dichotomy created by people who interface a great deal outside their department versus those who are more insular. There’s the potential that more siloed individuals show the same disconnect or lack of understanding towards their peers in other departments while displaying higher levels of frustration at position ignorance directed towards them.

**Recognition Source**

When asked in what ways the interviewees felt appreciated for their work, a contrast emerged between a person’s direct supervisor/manager and peers at the institution. People talked about their supervisor or dean/chair making an effort to recognize their work in connection to prompts of feeling valued by the institution. When asked when they felt appreciated at work, stories focused on peer recognition and acknowledgement, not leadership praise.

These types of statements led to the creation of second-order themes—peer recognition and leadership recognition. Peer recognition stems from people feeling that their peers recognized what they do, and that peer recognition increases OBSE, or sense of value. Statements such as, “they [peers within department] gave me a big shout out,” exemplify this theme. Universally, interviewees mentioned positive stories about their peers saying ‘thank you’ for the work they do. After further analysis, the peer recognition source was further broken down into three attributes: leadership, intragroup, and intergroup sources.

Leadership recognition emerged organically from conversations about being valued by the organization—interviewees were never prompted to talk about their manager or chair. This indicates an association of leaders and managers as faces of the institution and as a distinct source of perceived value. Statements such as, “I feel valued at this institution that the high level executives at this institution know me by name” or “on a daily basis, I feel valued by my dean” reinforce the view that recognition source is an important dimension in perceived institutional worth.

**Relationships**

This identified factor is based on statements such as, “I don't see staff members as much as I would like” and “I feel it's very important to interact [with staff, professors outside my department] because how will I know where to send a student for the right advice.”

In reviewing the transcripts, a divide emerged within this area. While faculty indicated a wish to interact more with staff, their examples of feeling valued by others focused on acknowledgement for individual accomplishments by colleagues within the faculty. Their definition of colleague was narrower than staff, who shared stories of feeling valued that included cross-functional projects and interactions. When asked about feeling appreciated by a colleague, faculty conveyed stories such as, “I really have worked hard on redesigning that two-course sequence and to have it be acknowledged by someone [another professor] with hands on knowledge of it was really pretty cool.”

This type of statement indicates a more individualistic subculture within the faculty while staff demonstrated a more collectivistic attitude towards recognition and OBSE. When asked the same question about being valued by others, staff stories included broader reach. For example, “A trustee, an alum, and an employee came to my office today to tell me how great of a job we did…” and “… what makes me feel good about my job is that people around campus, faculty, staff, or students say, ‘Wow, you're doing a great job,’ or, ‘You're so helpful.’” In both these representative quotes, multiple cross-divisional groups are highlighted as sources of recognition and sense of worth, which did not emerge in the faculty interviews.

**Discussion**

There is evidence from existing literature to support the importance of the three aggregate dimensions identified through the interviews. This analysis and subsequent model creation draw from research in OBSE, social worth, relational coordination, and human motivation.

Organization-based self-esteem has a growing body of literature, stemming from the seminal 1989 article, which defined OBSE as “the degree to which an individual believes him/herself to be capable, significant, and worthy as an organizational member” (Pierce et al., 1989). Though OBSE is influenced by the individual’s overall self-evaluation, or global self-esteem; it also changes in reaction to organizational factors such as experiences of leadership styles and organizational structure (Mayer, Whitfield, & Godkin, 2001), relationships with others (Bowling, Eschleman, Qiang, Kirkendall, & Alarcon, 2010), and workplace stressors (Long, Li, & Ning, 2015). These relational factors supplement more transactional researched consequences such as the potential for advancement, flexible work arrangements, or monetary compensation (e.g., Spears, 2012).

Another relevant body of literature is that on perceived social worth, which indicates individuals are more motivated to do a good job when they feel that work is valued by others (Grant, 2008). This work, however, does not explore the potentially different weights given to in-group versus out-group recognition sources. Regardless, it is a strong foundation for this research study given the emergence of relationships as a potential variable influencing OBSE.

Here, we will walk through each aggregate dimension identified through the interview coding, linking them to existing literature while showcasing the potential interaction among variables, which is visually represented by the theoretical model in Figure 2 and described in more depth in the next section.

**Position Ignorance**

For the proposed model, Position Ignorance is defined as the degree to which colleagues outside an individual’s home department know and understand her role and how it impacts the organization. This operationalized variable draws from existing literature on intergroup conflict and knowledge sharing. It is not related to role clarity or ambiguity, which explores the impact of ambiguous job definitions on the individual employee and her morale (e.g., Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2011).

There is limited literature related to position ignorance and its impact on OBSE, as it does not fully align with any of the three self-esteem antecedent categories of organization structure, messages from significant others, or direct experiences (Jaewon, 2003; Norman, Gardner, & Pierce, 2015; Pierce et al., 1989). That said, one could make the case that messages from significant others may demonstrate the level of knowledge one has about a person’s job responsibilities and hence influence OBSE. This is loosely supported by “interpersonal sensemaking” within the work context (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). In their theoretical paper, the authors highlight the importance of cues from others in determining the value and meaning of one’s work (related back to the OBSE antecedent of messages from significant others) and in shaping work identity. Supportive coworkers (e.g., Izwar Ibrahim, 2014) may also know more about a person’s job responsibilities, creating a perception of lower position ignorance. Again, however, there was no discovered literature directly defining position ignorance or its relationship to OBSE.

Literature on knowledge sharing may also shed some light on the position ignorance variable, as it analyzes the competitive benefits of the purposeful sharing of knowledge across various levels of an organization (related to the second-order theme of “communication challenges” from Figure 1). In this case, the lack of sharing beyond individual explicit knowledge indicates an absence of organizational structure and cultural support for more intricate levels of sharing such as social tacit knowledge (Riege, 2005). This in turn fosters position ignorance, as well as poor intergroup relationships.

Based on the available literature and the study data, it is hypothesized that the perceived degree of position ignorance will increase or decrease an individual’s sense of worth, or OBSE, regardless of his position within the organization—whether faculty or staff. Higher position ignorance will yield lower OBSE and vice versa.

**Recognition Source**

Recognition source is closely tied to a broader category of employee recognition and reward. Using existing literature as a foundation, the independent variable of Recognition Source is operationalized as the recognition of an employee’s work and her positive impact on the organization or on the individual(s) providing recognition.

There is extensive research in this area, including work on human motivation from prominent psychologists such as Maslow and Herzberg. Hansen, Smith, and Hansen (2016) provide a thorough overview of the differentiation between rewards and recognition, highlighting the duality of human motivations—intrinsic versus extrinsic. In particular, they discuss the transactional nature of rewards and the transformational nature of recognition. This is supported in the interviews, when all but one individual pointed to recognition (not reward) as a source of feeling valued or appreciated for their work.

Brun and Ninon (2008) take this further, conducting an extensive analysis of existing literature on employee recognition to identify four recognition practices within organizations and five levels of interaction. These align with the duality between peer and leadership recognition sources conveyed during the interviews. Leadership recognition aligns with vertical levels of interaction, while peer recognition aligns with horizontal levels of interaction. Both levels are important to improving a sense of value to the organization, horizontal levels of interaction (recognition from peers) emerged as a sign of peer appreciation while vertical levels of interaction (recognition from leadership) was aligned with institutional signs of value or worth.

There is enough established research on recognition and OBSE, that one can posit that regardless of employee category, recognition source will have a direct impact on sense of value within higher education institutions. The potential for differentiation between faculty and staff OBSE comes from the importance placed on intragroup or intergroup sources of recognition, which is represented in the model proposed in the next section.

**Relationships**

From the interviews, it appears that Relationships are central factors impacting employee OBSE. This variable can be defined as the strength and frequency of collegial interactions between two or more individuals from within the same organization. There is the potential for a further breakdown, exploring the nuances of relationships still within the faculty subgroup yet across disciplines versus cross-function relationships that connect more diverse roles at the institution. For this paper, the variable is broken down into two attributes that capture this divide—intragroup relationships (individuals from different disciplines but within the same functional area) and intergroup relationships (individuals from different functional units).

The most directly relevant OBSE research to this variable is coworker support. Peer collaboration and coworker support are shown to impact OBSE (Ding, Ng, Wang, & Zou, 2012; Ekrot, Rank, & Gemünden, 2016; Izwar Ibrahim, 2014), which is related to Pierce and Gardner’s original antecedent of feedback from significant others. There has been some exploration of the importance of positive relationships and support on OBSE (e.g., Manger & Eikeland, 1990), but it is limited in scope and appears to focus on direct (intragroup) relationships instead of cross-functional.

There is also relevant research on intergroup dynamics and in-group/out-group bias (e.g., Jehn, 1997; Lalonde, Maghaddam, & Taylor, 2001). Greaves and Sorenson (1999) give an overview of the conditions that contribute to poor intergroup relations and high conflict: strength of group identities, lack of systems in place to share information, and lack of connection between individuals/groups and the organization. The first and second factors relate strongly to intergroup relationships, highlighting the importance of appropriate structures to facilitate the sharing of information and to bridge group identities. The negative impact of this type of structural and/or cultural barrier to cross-functional interaction is supported by others, including Kezar (2005), Pham and Tanner (2015), and Kuo (2009). Kuo’s article, in particular, highlights the negative impact of “fragmentation” caused by a lack of understanding (position ignorance) and interaction (relationships).

This work leads naturally into the area of relational coordination, which Gittell defines as “a network of communication and relationship ties among workers, and can be thought of as a form of organizational social capital likely to enhance organizational performance” (2000, p. 518). Her research demonstrated the positive impact on outcomes from cross-functional coordination, but it does not take the next step to explore its impact on OBSE.

This particular variable has an additional nuance, showing a potential cultural divide between faculty and staff—a division created around Hofstede’s individualistic/collectivistic dimension (2011). One could hypothesize that, based on the interviews, faculty’s OBSE is more positively impacted by other faculty, or intragroup, relationships; and staff’s OBSE is more positively impacted by intergroup relationships, or those outside their functional unit.

There is a wealth of research on higher education culture that supports this theory, with articles focused primarily on the “academic,” or faculty, subgroup. For example, Kuh and Whitt dive into academic culture in a 1988 report for ASHE-ERIC Higher Education. The bulk of their analysis looks at faculty culture, including the concept that academic culture is based on individual autonomy and academic freedom. This is reinforced by newer work revealing a tendency for individual autonomy and independence among faculty (Sullivan, 2000) and a duality of cultures within higher education (Hui-Min, 2009). Smerek (2010) highlights the fragmentation between faculty and administration, and the subgroups’ tendency to build consensus and clarity within their own group but not beyond. These subgroup formations are labeled “fault lines” by some researchers (Rowland, 2002; Whitchurch & Harvey, 2013), who indicate the divisions go deeper into the organization by dividing faculty along discipline lines as well as the broader categories of faculty, administration, or staff. These fault lines create divides within divides, reducing institution-wide unity and shared goals.

Many of the researchers of higher education point to the lack of in-depth analysis of staff perspectives, which leaves room for greater development in that area. Graham (2010, 2012) has explored staff perceptions through case studies, but the work is limited with the author acknowledging potential shortcomings. Based on this paper’s qualitative study, one can posit that staff (or administration) does have a subculture when analyzing OBSE, which is more collectivistic and group-work oriented. This would need additional research given the lack of existing literature in the area of staff culture.

**The Employee Connectivity Model**

Though existing research provides an important backdrop for the variables identified in this research, there is limited OBSE work within a higher education context and limited exploration of position ignorance and relationships as defined in this qualitative study. The proposed Employee Connectivity Model (Figure 2) builds a higher education OBSE model that incorporates relationships and position ignorance as new potential consequences of self-esteem, while accounting for academic subcultures. It depicts universal influences of leadership recognition source and position ignorance, which would impact OBSE regardless of group affiliation. It then proposes that affiliation with faculty or staff subgroups will mediate the impact of certain recognition sources and relationship attributes, as identified in the interview transcript coding process.

In this theoretical model, faculty OBSE will be more positively impacted by intragroup recognition sources (other faculty) than by intergroup sources (individuals outside the faculty subgroup). Similarly, intragroup relationships will have a stronger impact on OBSE for faculty than will intergroup relationships (those outside of faculty). The converse is proposed for staff, for whom intergroup recognition and intergroup relationships will have a stronger influence on OBSE levels. For both groups, leadership recognition will positively impact OBSE while higher levels of perceived position ignorance will negatively impact OBSE.

**Conclusion**

This qualitative research study provides a glimpse into the differences and similarities between two employee subgroups of small-to-medium-sized higher education institutions. Though the interviews provided important context for the proposed model of OBSE, there were limitations to the research. For example, the sample size was small and would benefit from additional interviews. There is also the potential that the model would not replicate in larger institutions, particularly research-focused international organizations with greater complexity in structures and processes. Even with the limited sample size, this author believes that the presented model is the first step to improving OBSE within higher education. The next stage in this research is a broader, multi-institution quantitative survey that rigorously tests the model with larger, more diverse groups of higher education employees.

The Employee Connectivity Model strives to identify institutional factors that will positively (or negatively) impact higher education employees’ OBSE. As mentioned previously, there is minimal research of OBSE within the higher education sphere and little work to identify a potential staff subculture. In 1993, Bloland called for higher education to study itself. Since then, research has proliferated about the academy with particular focus on faculty governance, tension between faculty and administration, and a changing paradigm for education.

This study seeks to fill the gap in system-wide higher education research while recognizing that all individuals benefit from higher levels of OBSE. If academic institutions can openly discuss subcultures and the differentiating impacts on OBSE, they can reap the rewards of higher OBSE across all departments. At the most basic level, employees who feel valued by their organizations are more engaged and committed to their employer (e.g., Bowling, Eschleman, Qiang, Kirkendall, & Alarcon, 2010; Panaccio & Vandenberghe, 2011; Pierce & Gardner, 2004; Yanhan, 2016). This can increase employee retention and satisfaction, which in turn positively impacts organization-wide culture.

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**Figures**

*Figure 1: Educational faculty and staff perceptions*

**Aggregate Dimensions**

**2nd Order Themes**

**1st Order Concepts**

* People kind of knew what I did but weren't sure
* A lot of people don't realize that I have another role
* They still don't understand that…I have things I need to work on for research and writing
* I feel like that's been hard to communicate to someone who doesn't know what labs are like
* There's a difference between a miscommunication… and a blatant ignoring everything that has ever been talked about

Lack of understanding

Communication challenges

Position

Ignorance

* To have it be acknowledged by someone with hands on knowledge of it was really pretty cool
* That a bunch of people at that time were on that committee that recognized me
* I get a lot of people who will email just, "Thank you for your work on this”
* If your boss doesn't value you, then you're not going to feel happy where you are
* [My dean] is quick to let you know when he values the work that you're doing

Peer recognition

Leadership recognition

Recognition Source

* I don't see staff members as much as I would like
* Some faculty members…focus a lot on their own department
* I usually interact with people daily outside my department
* We've [faculty] started to socialize outside of work
* I believe it's vital to have a great relationship with all members on campus
* It makes you feel part of the institution

Sense of belonging

Cross-department interactions

Relationships

*Figure 2: Employee Connectivity Model*

