

Online Onboarding of Community College  
Mid-Level Administrators

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### Dedication

I dedicate this capstone project to my husband *Igor* and my father *Dave*. You two have been my unwavering support team, the people editing paper after paper to get me to this point, and dare I say it...my cheerleaders! I could not have done this without you both being at my side the whole way to listen, read, believing I could do it, and taking this journey with me. I appreciate all that you do and loved that I was able to share this with both of you and yes daddy now I have another tool for my tool box. Thank you for everything you both have done and continue to do. I love you!

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## Table of Contents

<b>Introduction</b> .....	5
<b>Statement of Problem</b> .....	7
<b>Rationale</b> .....	9
<b>Theoretical Framework</b> .....	11
<b>Research Question</b> .....	17
<b>Key terms</b> .....	19
<b>Literature Review</b> .....	20
<b>Research Design</b> .....	25
<b>Research questions</b> .....	25
<b>Research methods</b> .....	26
Pilot program implementation. ....	27
Module content. ....	29
Participants.....	33
<b>Instrumentation</b> .....	37
Trustworthiness and Reliability .....	39
<b>Data Collection Procedures</b> .....	41
<b>Interview design</b> .....	44
<b>Ethical Considerations</b> .....	45
Confidentiality and consent procedures for participants and focus groups.....	46
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	47
<b>Findings and Discussions</b> .....	49
<b>Findings</b> .....	49
PPP activity statistics and module survey responses. ....	50
Emerging common feedback themes. ....	51
<b>Discussion</b> .....	58
<b>Generalizability</b> .....	68
<b>Limitations</b> .....	69
<b>Conclusions</b> .....	71
<b>Recommendations</b> .....	71
<b>References</b> .....	75
Appendix A: Focus group questions for MLA participants.....	87

Appendix B: Electronic module surveys for onboarding participants .....	88
Appendix C: Focus group questions for HLA participants.....	89
Appendix D: Module survey responses for pilot program participants .....	90
Appendix E: Questionnaire responses .....	93
Appendix F: Optional Module Feedback.....	99
Appendix G: Onboarding Module Content.....	102
Appendix H: Participant Demographics .....	108
Appendix I: HLA Consent Form .....	109
Appendix J: MLA Consent Form .....	111
Appendix K: MLA Participant Consent Form.....	113
Appendix L: MLA Onboarding Coding Manual .....	116

## Online Onboarding of Community College Mid-Level Administrators

### **Introduction**

*Elizabeth's first day as a director finally arrived. She had earned her graduate degree to have this opportunity. Thinking she would receive guidance on leading and managing her new staff, she was not worried that she was only a content expert who knew how to grow an international student program. Little did she know that she would soon alienate her staff, run afoul of the local union, anger both the HR department and her immediate supervisor, and nearly end the career she had spent years pursuing – all because she received no training for a newly-hired mid-level administrator.*

Elizabeth's problem is not unique, as institutions of higher education have been slow to train and develop their own administrators during their first year on the job. Candidates are primarily hired for their scholarly qualifications or content expertise rather than for their administrative experience (Hicks, Peters, & Smith, 2006). These individuals are often ill-prepared to be effective administrators. Directors and deans typically arrive at their posts by moving through the student services and academic ranks, picking up administrative skills as they go (Urciuoli, 2003). This ad hoc method of gaining experience is inefficient, haphazard, and can leave gaps in the administrator's knowledge base. It is a problem that academia has been struggling with since the 1980s (Caffarella, 1985). A Vice President with over 30 years of community college leadership experience shared that failing to learn from others' successes and failures makes one vulnerable to making avoidable mistakes, while repeated trial-and-error efforts are detrimental to both the individual and the institution (R. Coats, personal communication, March 3, 2015). Scholars and administrators alike speak about the great leadership crises in higher education; even the American Council on Education (Eckel, Hill, &

Green, 1998) calls for solutions to the leadership dilemma (Gmelch, Hopkins, Dee, Damico, & Bowman, 2011). One of the least studied and most misunderstood management position is that of a dean. Although typically considered to be and performed as an administrative job, it is actually a strategically pivotal leadership position. (Gmelch et al., 2011).

Rather than providing guidance to new deans, institutions seem to expect the guidance to come from the candidates they hire based on the required duties in the job descriptions (Gmelch, 2000). Despite the recognized leadership problem, colleges and universities appear to be unable or unwilling to provide assistance to incoming academic leaders. The author's personal experiences and preliminary investigations indicated a clear need for a formalized training process for new mid-level administrators (MLAs), defined as directors and deans, in Washington State Board of Community and Technical Colleges (SBCTC).

Newly hired MLAs, with whom the author conversed, disclosed that they were only addressing daily operations to satisfy their subordinates' immediate needs. This is a natural result of a task-driven environment, particularly if an MLA has not yet acquired a holistic view of an organization's needs and activities. This situation is exacerbated in the common case of MLAs who are promoted into management positions due to their competence in another field; their past successes stem from performing specific tasks. However, their new positions typically involve completely different tasks and demands unrelated to the MLAs' previous environments. For example, being an excellent statistics instructor does not necessarily qualify a person to be a dean of a natural science department. This can lead to various problems in an environment as complex as the modern college. SBCTC colleges require that MLAs maintain an awareness of regulations and policies at the federal, state, and college levels. MLAs also must contend with

the college's relationship with a labor union; however this information is not widely communicated to MLAs.

In conversations with her peers, the author often heard comments about feeling overwhelmed by their new roles as managers and leaders. These individuals often revert to focusing on their areas of expertise instead of managing and leading others. These administrators feel they have not been properly prepared for their new roles; they lack tools and understanding to be successful in performing their new responsibilities. The general perceived experience is that they have been “thrown into the lion's den”, set up to fail, and upper management is indifferent to their needs. Yet, one of the reasons employees stay with an organization is because they are satisfied and their needs are met (Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002). Helping employees understand job requirements and develop the appropriate skill set to meet those expectations effectively leads to employees who stay engaged in their work (Harter et al., 2002).

### **Statement of Problem**

This study seeks to identify components and attributes of a successful onboarding<sup>1</sup> process at a community college, particularly with mid-level administrators. MLAs fill a pivotal role within an institution – they are the linchpin connecting Vice Presidents and Presidents (High Level Administrators or HLAs) with classified staff and students. As HLAs select new goals and directions for the institution, MLAs must develop implementation plans and direct the efforts of the staff. If the classified staff encounters challenges, the MLAs must either develop and coordinate a remediation plan or communicate the problem to the appropriate HLA.

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<sup>1</sup> Onboarding will be further defined below, but the basic definition concerns integrating new hires into the work environment.

Consequently, whether or not an institution is trying to evolve, it relies heavily on its MLAs' competencies (Whetham, 2015).

Upon hire, most MLAs are unprepared to meet leadership and management performance expectations of the role (Vicker & Royer, 2005). The time it takes these individuals to acquire appropriate skill sets on their own can be as long as two to three years (Northouse, 2015). Additionally, because individuals are not trained to reduce variation in practice, inconsistent practices can develop, posing a risk to the organization. New MLAs recognize that they do not feel confident in their capacity to lead and manage their staff. The stress experienced by both MLAs and their subordinates can undermine actual work accomplishment (Diddams & Chang, 2012). This stress creates a tendency for high turnover for MLAs (Fagan, 2012).

Most employees make up their mind about staying in the job within the first 90 days of employment (Dai & De Meuse, 2007). If employees do not see where or how they fit within an organization, they disengage (Bradt & Bancroft, 2010). Hiring new employees is a time-consuming and expensive process for the staff, as well as the institution. A human resource professional, of over 20 years, at a regional community college shared that cost to replace a mid-level administrator, in terms of just hiring costs alone, is \$5,270 (L. Dignan, personal communication, April 27, 2015).

In order to save money and retain employees, community colleges in the state of Washington need a cost-effective and accessible onboarding process that targets key management and leadership information and practices in the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) that these new employees lack. This knowledge needs to be readily transferrable into daily practice so that adult learners can see the applicability of what they are learning within the onboarding process. Preliminary inquiries revealed that the current practice of hiring non-

managers for MLA positions at a community college resulted in a significant gap between desired and actual skill sets. The process of improving MLA capabilities for dealing effectively with new responsibilities is critical if higher education institutions are to meet student expectations (Richardson, 1975).

### **Rationale**

The three most compelling reasons to develop an institutional onboarding process are (a) employees garner skills they may lack for the position, (b) employees feel more prepared in their position and start fostering relationships with other employees, and (c) employees become more productive sooner (Son, 2015). Recognizing that MLAs do not typically come with a skill set needed to successfully manage or lead, the Washington State Board of Colleges and Technical Colleges established the Association of Washington Community and Technical College Administrators and Exempt Staff to improve overall MLA management skills (Whetham, 2015). The presidents of the Washington State community college system saw this lack of skills as a problem and wanted to address it system-wide (Whetham, 2015). This association is the only dedicated resource for MLAs in Washington State's community and technical college system. The SBCTC provides two types of MLA learning opportunities through the Association.

The first opportunity is the quarterly "Leading from the Middle" meetings for MLAs from the state's thirty-four community and technical colleges (Whetham, 2015). Each meeting provides a platform for networking as well as a day of training in a topic selected by the SBCTC. These meetings occur at a central location, so attendees must leave their college to attend. While participants deem these meetings valuable, constraints such as time, budgets, and topic applicability can make it difficult for many MLAs to attend. The second opportunity is the annual "Leading from the Middle" retreat (Whetham, 2015). It is an information-intensive event

designed to engage participants in learning leadership and management skills, as well as system-wide networking. However, with a duration of four days and a price tag of \$1,400 (Whetham, 2015), these retreats can be both cost- and time-prohibitive. They are also held once a year, so depending on when a MLA is hired it; the timing may not be advantageous for the college or MLA.

Both MLAs and HLAs recognize the need for an MLA onboarding process at community colleges. New deans and directors have identified the lack of preparedness and what that lack of knowledge has cost them in terms of productivity. MLAs have verbalized increased difficulties and lack of trust in working with subordinates after committing management errors as a result of their lack of training or knowledge (Gmelch, 2000). HLAs shared with the author how many people bypass MLAs and come to them because of damaged relationships between the subordinates and the MLA (R. Coats, personal communication, May 11, 2015). To help avoid this damage, as well as reduce the rate of turnover for MLAs, the author planned, developed, and implemented a pilot onboarding process for the Washington State SBCTC. Due to this being a pilot program the author focused on one community college in the SBCTC system.

Friedman (2006) suggested that one can achieve improved administrative performance by providing a sharper, clearer definition of how the performance is perceived by those who work directly with the individual. MLAs need to understand who they are and how their personality relates to their peers and their subordinates. Additionally, it is important to understand the essential job functions and expectations of the position they occupy and how the necessary skill set will allow them to confidently and competently address daily work activities. Administrators have to network effectively with their peers (Darling, Friedlaender, & Snyder, 2014), understand how to manage subordinates, and align their efforts with the vision, goals, values, and mission of

the college (Kotter, 1999). They are more likely to accomplish all of this if they receive training in a timely manner; a thorough onboarding will provide this hitherto absent training (Boroughs, Palmer, & Hunter, 2012).

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study used Knowles (1970) model of adult learning and Bolman and Deal's (2008) four-framed leadership model as theoretical frameworks. Knowles' theories of andragogy, as well as the underpinning principles of adult learning, were applied in designing an online onboarding program for MLAs in the SBCTC system. Although first described in 1833 by Alexander Kapp in Germany, it was Malcolm Knowles, an American practitioner and theorist of adult education, who pioneered andragogy as a theory and model of adult learning in the 1970s. Knowles defined andragogy as the art and science of helping adults learn (Zmeyov, 1998; Fidishun, 2000). Furthermore, Knowles supported a life-long learning model with the adult learner taking responsibility (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2012). Knowles' theory of andragogy helped shape the proposed process by which institutions can provide MLAs with the knowledge they require to be effective during their first year. Knowles is still relevant, as he created an alternative education model for adults, which is still situated in learning theories today (Halpern & Tucker, 2015).

Knowles et al., (2012) identified six assumptions about the principal attributes of adult learners. As a group, these learners share the following common traits:

1. The need to know: The adult learner needs to have context, as well as an understanding of why they are learning something. Having context of why going through an onboarding process is important, MLAs place more value on moving through the modules, which can lead to self-direction. MLAs have a clearer understanding of the

benefits of learning the lessons and have a better understanding of the “consequences of not learning the lesson” (Knowles, 1970, p. 56).

2. The role of the learner’s experience: Throughout their lives, adult learners gain experiences they can relate to what they are learning, which makes the learning experience richer. As adult learners, MLAs come into their roles with many years of experiences to include work, life, and academia. MLAs’ knowledge needs to be accessed to affirm the MLAs’ value, as well as to help confirm their concept as self-directed learners.
3. The learner’s self-concept: Adult learners have a strong sense of independence; therefore, there may be resistance if they feel forced to learn in a certain way. A program must acknowledge adult learners in a way that realizes their need for self-conception and self-direction by moving them from being dependent to being independent. MLAs need to be shown what tools are available to them, but not necessarily how to use them and when.
4. Readiness to learn: This principle relates to the first assumed principle that adults learn content when it is situationally appropriate. MLAs would not be ready for management training until they understood the area they are managing. The fact that MLAs are content experts plays a significant role in application of this principle. Scaffolding lessons to meet the MLAs “where they currently are is an important assumption within andragogical framework” (Halpern & Tucker, 2015, p. 115).
5. Orientation to learning: Problem-solving and task-centered exercises work best for adult learners, as they are able to better absorb the lessons presented in this manner. MLAs will retain information if they can see its applicability to real-world scenarios.

6. Motivation: Adult learners are more motivated to learn by internal factors, unlike younger learners, who are motivated to learn by external factors. This means that adults learn from goal-setting, career aspirations, and self-perception. MLAs fall into this category, as many have leadership qualities that encompass these attributes (Mumford, Zaccaro, Connelly, & Marks, 2000).

Not all learners conform to all six tenets; likewise, these six tenets do not comprise an exhaustive list of adult learner characteristics. However, they do serve as a foundation for adult learning theory. Within this framework, the essential factor is self-directed learning; adult learners tend to take the initiative to diagnose their learning needs, formulate goals, identify resources for learning, select and implement appropriate learning strategies, and evaluate outcomes (Knowles et al., 2012).

While this study used Knowles' theory as a framework, it also considered additional characteristics of adult learners as a lens through which a SBCTC's onboarding program was developed and evaluated. An online program informed by adult-centered strategies can be a powerful tool for engaging with the adult online learner (Halpern & Tucker, 2015).

Andragogy establishes a constructive learning theory that adults need to be involved in their own instruction. Constructivist learning theory - the premise that learning is both social and reflective – complements andragogy. Constructivists like Knowles understand that people create meaning through interactions of prior learning and experiences as a way to understand new material they are learning (Anderman & Anderman, 2009).

Knowles' framework has enabled modern educators to develop four principles of andragogy that best facilitate adult learning. Adult-centered instruction should have the following attributes:

- Be highly relevant: best practices in an online learning environment include making each lesson or module highly relevant to students' work (Park & Choi, 2009)
- Be problem-based to encourage critical thinking and reflective learning: establish opportunities for collaboration and reflection (Tsai, 2013) and engage adult learners through exercises (Cheaney & Ingebristen, 2005).
- Acknowledge prior work and experience by leaving room to incorporate previous knowledge; and
- Be self-paced (Ota, DiCarlos, Burts, Laird & Gioe, 2006)

Knowles' assumptions about how adults learn assist workplace trainers in developing a training curriculum that meets practical needs captured in behavioral objectives (Whatkins & Marsick, 2014). Successfully creating change, providing organizational direction and supporting organizational effectiveness are critical to being an effective leader in higher education (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006).

Bolman and Deal's (2008) leadership frame theory suggests that life's daily challenges are not clear and precise; instead they are opaque and vague. Bolman and Deal's approach to understanding and managing this chaos, as well as actually leading organizations allow MLAs room to discover their own management and leadership style within the context of four different frames (Bolman & Deal, 2008). These leadership frames take into account existing research on leadership, organizations, and management. The four frames affecting organizations are: *human resource, political, structural, and symbolic*. These frames are classifications that describe the ways leaders think and react to situations. Each frame focuses on a different aspect of organizational behavior (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The human resource leadership frame uses assumptions from psychology and organizational behavior to emphasize relations between human needs and the organization. Leaders guided by a human resource frame value relationships and feelings and lead through empowering subordinates. The organization will be adjusted to solve the problems and will fit the needs of the employee (Daft, 2005). This frame recognizes people as the organization's most valuable resource. Effective leaders use the human resource perspective to involve others and give them opportunities for personal and professional development. The characteristics associated with this frame are the sense of belonging, unity, and the organization as a family (Bolman & Deal, 2008).

The political frame of reference views organizations as arenas of ongoing conflict or tension over the allocation of scarce resources. This frame borrows the idea from political science that organizations compete for scarce resources, and conflict is a normal consequence of this competition (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Leaders spend much of their time networking and building alliances and coalitions to influence decisions. A metaphor for the political frame is the television show *Survivor*. By the second or third episode, the leaders start emerging and forming their alliances, and political plays are a natural part of organizational culture (Bolman & Deal, 2008). These leaders continuously strive to build a power base, and they frequently employ both personal and organizational power to achieve their desired goals.

During the onboarding process, MLAs will be asked to network with five people in the organization that their subordinates suggest, and five people their supervisors recommend; these ten individuals will enable the MLA to develop a networking base.

The structural leadership frame emphasizes clear goals and efficiency (Bolman & Deal, 2008). A leader intentionally using the structural frame distinguishes clear goals, designates

people-specific roles, and coordinates activities using policies, procedures, and a formal chain of command (Bolman & Deal, 2008). These policies and procedures ensure both predictability and uniformity within an organization. This helps to ensure that comparable situations are handled in a consistent way. Structural leaders value hard data and analysis, keep an eye on the bottom line, and stress adherence to accepted standards and conformity to the rules as a way to bring order and logic to the organization (Daft, 2005). The onboarding process will prompt the MLA to work with their supervisor and subordinates to create concrete personal goals as well as establish departmental goals.

The symbolic frame idealizes the sense of mission and identity within the organization (Bolman & Deal, 2008). Through the symbolic frame a leader views an organization as a system of shared vision and values. This culture of shared beliefs and values gives organizations a sense of purpose, promotes cohesion, and offers a vision as to what the future may hold (Daft, 2005). Leaders use symbols as a means of leading the organization. The symbolic leader is effective when the leader places symbolic value on intentions rather than relying on formal power and the use of politics (Bennis, 2003). Rituals, protocols and manners can be used by symbolic leaders for unethical and self-serving purposes. Daft concurs with Bolman and Deal, noting that one danger of relying too heavily on the symbolic frame is that leaders risk developing a “messiah” complex, shifting the focus from the organization to the leader (Daft, 2005).

The MLA will experience the symbolic frame by watching a video where the President outlines the vision and mission of the college. Additionally the MLA will be able to read the values of the college and incorporate this into their daily work.

Identifying and using a combination of the human resource, political, structural, and symbolic frames allows leaders to better understand the complexities of an organization (Bolman

& Deal, 2008). Bolman and Deal (2008) describe the organization as having multiple realities which produce confusion and conflict as the individuals interpret the same events through their own lenses (frames). An effective leader can use this knowledge and match a particular frame or combination of frames to a situation. When a person's actions appear to make no sense, a leader can use the appropriate lens to peer into an individual's frame and understand their actions. This study exposed the MLA to these four frames so they were be able to choose which frame would be the most advantageous to use.

The table below summarizes the major theories that influenced the design of the initial onboarding program.

Table 1

*Summary of Theories Used in the Onboarding Program*

<b>Theory</b>	<b>How the theory was applied</b>
Knowles' theories of andragogy	Influenced the interactive components in each model, as well as the ability to provide feedback for what participants wanted to have future.
Bolman and Deal's (2008) leadership frame theory	This influenced the 3 <sup>rd</sup> module regarding leadership and management. Participants were able to see what leadership frame they worked from in their current role.
Skinner's "teaching machine"	The reason why the onboarding program is developed with modules.

### **Research Question**

The research question for this study is: "What components are needed in an onboarding program for new mid-level administrators in order to perceive they are decreasing their time to

productivity as managers and leaders?” The subsequent question is “How can adult learning style theory be used to improve the design of the new onboarding experience of mid-level administrators in Washington community colleges?” Since SBCTC colleges do not currently have an onboarding process, the researcher designed and implemented an abbreviated onboarding program. To protect the identities of the participants, the study will refer to its pseudonym, Onboarding Community College (OCC).

The author looked at it as a case study designed to be a pilot program, specifically developed and implemented to answer the research question. This program examined three initial issues and concerns of MLAs: campus culture, networking, and skills needed to lead and manage, and sought to answer the question of what knowledge, skills, and abilities must be included in the institutional onboarding model for new community college MLAs. The study used an online delivery method to determine if it is an appropriate way for new MLAs to learn this material. The scope of the study was directly linked to institutional topics that included institutional culture and training, networking, and leadership and management. Participants evaluated the process based on self-perceptions of their role as administrators within this pilot program. This provided insights into attitudes and perceptions of the target population, as well as an assessment of professional development needs. Feedback allowed for revisions, resulting in a continuously improving, three-module online onboarding process that was intended to help newly hired MLAs adjust to their new roles.

Understanding how these individuals perceive themselves is critical to how they perform within the organization. If they perceive they are better prepared to lead and manage, they will be more effective in their roles (Conyers, 2010). Moreover, if a MLA comes into a position and the college has an onboarding program in place to help them do their job, a possible perception is

that the organization cares about its new employees by having a mechanism in place for them to acclimate into their role in a deliberate manner. Additionally as MLAs are able to engage in their roles due to gaining knowledge around how accomplish certain tasks at the college (e.g. purchase items, who to contact for what, and how to hire people) their subordinates are then able to maintain or reinstate their own work engagement, as they do not need to keep interrupting their own workload to help the MLA. Participants' module evaluations and self-evaluations of their leadership and management abilities addressed the research question.

### **Key terms**

The terms orientation and onboarding are often used interchangeably; however, these are fundamentally different activities. Although both are concerned with integrating new hires into the work environment, it is possible to differentiate between the two based on duration and content. According to the Human Resources Association of Central Connecticut, orientation is a one- or two-day transactional exercise for filling out required paperwork. Orientation typically represents a unidirectional flow of information from HR to the new hire. Onboarding, on the other hand, lasts between three and twelve months, focuses on employee engagement, and represents a collaborative effort (Ward, 2014).

Since there are numerous definitions for onboarding, the researcher proposes the following one to be used within this project: Onboarding is a process of giving newly hired MLAs the tools needed to do their jobs, thus decreasing their time to productivity, increasing employee engagement and retention rates, and lowering overall costs (Mishra & Strait, 1993). The author applied the definition that employee engagement is an “employee feeling intellectually and emotionally attached to their work in such a way that the employee brings focus, energy, and commitment to their work” (Russell & Russell, 2010, p. 1). Adult learners, as

defined by the American Council on Education (2014), are students over the age of 25 years. Since new MLAs are typically over 25 years of age, it is important to treat them as adult learners (Pierce, 2011).

### **Literature Review**

A literature review focusing on key points of onboarding revealed that there are numerous benefits, strategies, and recommendations for onboarding. Onboarding strategies are consistently linked with benefits for not only the organization, but also for the employees themselves (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011; Ballard & Blessing, 2006; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Black & Leysen, 2002; Oud, 2008; and Whitmell, 2006). The most commonly cited benefits included better retention, increased job satisfaction and job fit, and higher rates of productivity and achievement for the organization. For example, Acevedo and Yancey (2011) observed: “New employee programs have been shown to socialize newcomers and increase their knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) upon completion. These types of programs are perhaps the most influential piece of an employee’s development” (p. 349).

Oud (2008) conducted a study at Canadian universities, focusing research on new librarians. Since the librarians fulfill an administrative role at their colleges and universities, the study aided in understanding how administrative employees in general are brought onboard and is useful in guiding establishment of onboarding programs. Oud’s research determined that the hardest things for these new employees to learn were workplace politics and culture, as well as how to get things done. Additionally, Oud discovered that new employees faced challenges related to local procedures, resources, structures, time management, work management, conflict management, and relationships with faculty.

A pattern of teaching solutions for the aforementioned onboarding problems emerges from the literature. The following strategies for effective employee onboarding were recommended repeatedly:

- Checklists are needed for employees and supervisors to use during the onboarding process. Eight publications recommended using checklists (Ballard & Blessing, 2006; Chapman, 2009; Graybill, Taesil Hudson Carpenter, Offord, Piorun & Shaffer, 2013; Oud, 2008; Portilla & Young, 2001; Simmons-Welburn & Welburn, 2003; Stein & Christiansen, 2010; and Whitmell, 2006). The use of checklists in onboarding new employees is cited as a common way to explicitly make sure what needs to be learned. Furthermore, it is a way to enumerate who is responsible for content delivery as well as the timelines for learning the material. Portilla & Young (2001) suggested developing relevant checklists by a committee and obtaining feedback from immediate colleagues, as well as recently hired employees, since they might have additional insight regarding the information that may need to be added. A checklist can be made available online, so supporting information or documentation can be linked for ease of access. The checklist also serves as a way to achieve consistency of the new employee experience across campus, as well as to set clear organizational expectations (Ballard & Blessing, 2006).
- Mentors and peer buddies are important, with thirteen publications detailing this strategy (Ballard & Blessing, 2006; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Black & Leysen, 2002; Graybill et al., 2013; Klein & Weaver, 2000; Knight, 2013; Oud, 2008; Portilla & Young, 2001; Simmons-Welburn & Welburn, 2003; Stein & Christiansen, 2010; and Whitmell, 2006). Assigning a mentor or a peer buddy provides a new employee with access to someone who can help answer questions such as the best approach to collaborate with a certain

colleague (Graybill et al., 2013) or why a given policy exists within the organization.

This is a great way for the new employee to become familiar with the culture of an organization. These individuals are paired with the new hire for anywhere from a few weeks to the first year of employment. The mentors or peer buddies are important because they not only answer questions, but also provide social and political support that helps the new employee fit into the organization (Bauer & Erdogan, 2011).

- Support and training for co-workers and supervisors of new hires were highlighted in seven publications as yet another important strategy (Ballard & Blessing, 2006; Black & Leysen, 2002; Chapman, 2009; Graybill et al., 2013; Kammeyer-Mueller, et al., 2013; Oud, 2008; Stein & Christiansen, 2010). It is easy for co-workers to forget what new hires might not yet know; it is also important for everyone in the organization to be aware of the goals and challenges of employee onboarding. For example, Oud (2008) notes:

Having some open discussion, for both existing and new employees, would help to foster an environment where new employees feel more comfortable asking for help and would simulate awareness by both new and existing employees of what issues and questions may arise (p. 265).

A bonus effect of attention to onboarding is that the current employees feel valued because they are made part of the process (Chapman, 2006). In the foreword to *Authentic Conversations: Moving from Manipulation to Truth and Commitment* by Showkeir and Showkeir (2008), Margaret Wheatley notes that, in the US, nearly 75% of workers are disengaged. The reason that many workers can be disengaged is that they were never properly onboarded into their work (Oud, 2008). Effective, committed leaders are valuable resources, as they fill a critical role within the human capital of that institution; thus, it is essential for them to be engaged so that

they can engage others. Having an institution set this tone in the onboarding process will convey the importance of their role as managers (Levin, 2010).

Another study, conducted by Hogan and Kaiser (2005), focused on the theoretical process model for social construction of leadership. The study looked at the emergence of leadership as a trait in an individual, determining that one could tease leadership from within an individual. Hogan and Kaiser (2005) assert that, in order to be an influential leader, one must build relationships to acquire status within an organization. When a formal onboarding process is present within an organization, a networking process can be included to foster social influence. Applying Knowles' theory, this would be possible by making the onboarding process relevant and applicable to the learner's work. The focus of an onboarding process at a specific institution, in turn, can be informed by reviewing research findings on required and desired competencies.

In its study of competencies for community college leaders, the American Association of Community Colleges (2005) found six competencies to be essential for an effective community college leader: organizational strategy, resource management, communication, collaboration, advocacy skills, and professionalism. Following Knowles' model, an effective onboarding program must address these competencies in order to be relevant to the learner's needs.

Building upon Knowles' theory of andragogy, online tutorials informed by adult-centered strategies can be a powerful tool for engaging the adult learner. In the 1960s, the American psychologist B.F. Skinner performed groundbreaking work in education design. Prior to Skinner, education was based on a "stimulus-response" foundation (Skinner, 1954). One of Skinner's major tenets is that learning is actually promoted through a series of positive and negative reinforcements. He further determined that the more immediately a learner received feedback, the stronger the reinforcement would be. To promote this immediacy, Skinner

conceived of a “teaching machine” that would provide instant feedback on the learner’s inputs. Furthermore, this “teaching machine” would allow learners to experiment with different inputs to learn what outcomes one could expect for a given set of actions (Skinner, 2014). Since Skinner believed that observing people’s behavior was the best way to figure them out, this can be actualized by using an online program. An observer can see how much time a participant spends within a given module to understand whether the person understands the material already or whether the provided content is not interesting. This hypothesis can be tested using a quiz format to see if the knowledge base was there. If it wasn’t, perhaps the provided content needs to be adjusted.

A number of higher education studies have used Bolman & Deal’s Leadership Orientation Instrument (LOI). Community college leadership studies showed human resource and structural as the primary frames, in contrast to political and symbolic (Borden, 2000; Harrell, 2006; Mann, 2006; Russell, 2000).

Studies also revealed a positive correlation between usage of the symbolic frame and worker satisfaction. Several existing studies of community colleges focused on different organizational levels. Russell (2000) studied the leadership frames of academic deans in the community college, finding deans with multiple leadership orientations reporting lower stress and higher satisfaction when compared with division deans using one primary leadership frame.

Michael Watkins (2006) provides practical advice on how to contribute with the first 90 days of employment. Watkins utilizes some of Bolman and Deal’s framework within his advice: promote yourself, match the strategy to the situation, secure early wins, negotiate success, and achieve alignments. Watkins then hones in on the importance of building one’s team and creating coalitions.

## **Research Design**

The purpose of this study is to determine whether a formal onboarding process would improve MLAs' confidence in their capabilities as managers and leaders. Since this study defines onboarding as a method to decrease new MLAs' perceived time to productivity by giving them tools needed to do their jobs, part of this study is to find out what tools they perceive as needed. This section presents the methodology used for the study. The research methods, participants, demographics, procedures, instrumentation, procedures used for data collection, ethical considerations, and data analysis procedure are described in further detail.

### **Research questions**

The focus of both the main research question and the secondary question was what components were needed for MLAs to perceive they are decreasing their time to productivity in and how using adult development theory can be used to improve the design of the program. A qualitative approach was selected because it is best suited for research that is experience-based (Creswell, 2012). Creswell also recommended that qualitative research should study participants in their natural setting, so the research was conducted on campus during work hours. Onboarding participants were also given the option to access the program off-campus. In this study, participants were asked to share their experiences of being a new employee, so that the research questions could be answered from the employee's perspective. Each MLA and HLA focus group member and onboarding participant answered specific questions and surveys (Appendices A-C), so that the author could understand what was needed, in terms of onboarding content, for OCC.

Interviewing tools and responses to the onboarding module surveys and questionnaire were used in data collection (Appendices E-F) since they are particularly useful in evaluative

research (LeCointre & Preissle, 1993). Seidman (2006) states, “The primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organization, institution, or process is through the experience of individual people, the ‘others’ who make up the organization or carry out the process” (p. 10). Onboarding practices vary from industry to industry and even from organization to organization; the only way to research how the process affects employees is by asking them to share specific details.

### **Research methods**

By selecting a qualitative research method, the researcher was able to interweave the experiences of the MLAs into this study via inquiring as to what components of the onboarding process enabled the specific MLA to feel more competent as a leader and a manager. This process involved three focus groups: MLAs, HLAs, and the onboarding participants. Each of the three groups had their own set of questions; additionally, the onboarding participant group completed module surveys to determine how useful they believed each module and program was to them. The program study revealed how engaged the participant felt during the process. The value, as well as the success, of an onboarding process was determined by the answers to module survey and focus group questions (Appendices A-F).

The pilot onboarding program formed the basis for a case study at a OCC. The case study included data from participants, interviews with HLAs and two MLA focus groups. The study addressed which components were needed to onboard MLAs, and whether utilizing Adult Development Theory enhances the onboarding experience from the MLA’s perspective. Guba and Lincoln claim case studies, as a research design, are the best reporting form for evaluations (1981). They also observe that case studies weigh “information to produce judgment. Judging is the final and ultimate act of evaluation” (1981, p. 375). After completing each module,

participants evaluated their experience and provided feedback, so module content could evolve to meet the changing needs of new MLAs (Appendices D-F).

Rubin and Rubin (2005) defined the purpose of case studies as a way to find out what happened, why, and what it means more broadly. In this program study, a formal onboarding process was the relevant phenomenon. Online surveys were conducted with newly hired MLAs at the end of each onboarding module (Appendix B). This not only allowed data collection, but also acknowledged Knowles' tenets that adult learners need to have their experiences validated by incorporating their feedback to enhance the onboarding program. Additionally, the study collected information about the topics MLAs would have liked to have in the program to determine additional modules needed for newly hired MLAs.

The role of the author in this program implementation and evaluation was as a participant observer (Bush & Jones, 2013) to design and implement a pilot program and collect data (Creswell, 2012).

**Pilot program implementation.** When Skinner conceived his *teaching machine*, the technology to implement it was not available. Consequently, his tenets led to programmed lessons and modular learning models that are still in use today (Gustafson & Branch, 2002). However, modern technology, particularly the Internet, provides tools that make building an interactive teaching machine possible. The author leveraged this technology to create a pilot onboarding program for MLAs for the SBCTC system. Since the SBCTC system has no onboarding program, the author chose to design and implement the system using the best practices found in librarian onboarding programs (Oud, 2008) as a guide. In doing so, the tenets of Skinner and Knowles influenced the program's structure and content. However, the author also required a technological platform for the program.

SBCTC colleges utilize the Canvas platform (n.d.) as their online classrooms; it also served as the pilot program's infrastructure. This is important in several respects. Since Canvas is well-known and well-supported throughout the SBCTC system, new MLAs will have support in using the technology (McKinnan, personal communication, January 6, 2015). Canvas is available throughout the campus as well as via remote connectivity and offers round-the-clock remote accessibility. This means MLAs can pursue their onboarding in their office, at home, or even if they are travelling. Finally, an online program aligns well with the institution's budgetary constraints, as it is already being maintained for faculty and students. As one makes content changes to the program, they appear instantaneously, without the time and expense incurred when using paper-based materials. Since Canvas is already in place, the college incurred no additional costs for a basic process platform.

Skinner's concepts of modularity and immediate feedback guided the structure of the new onboarding process. Modularity served several purposes. To begin with, the more modular the program is, the more readily learners and their supervisors can tailor it to the learner's needs. If the learner is already familiar with the material contained within a module, requiring the learner to take the module would violate Knowles' first and third tenets, so the supervisor should consider omitting that module from the learner's training plan. Additionally, increased modularity simplifies maintenance; as situations or information change, one may simply adjust the specific module rather than changing the entire program. Fine-grained modularity also promotes flexibility across the institution. For instance, if there is a module that explains a department's unique policies, each department can maintain its own policy module and plug it into the appropriate place within the overall program. Again, this promotes tailoring the program to specific learners. Finally, modularity helps realize the immediacy of feedback emphasized by

Skinner. Even if one withholds feedback until the learner completes a module, shorter modules will generally lead to faster feedback turnaround. Advances in technology now make it feasible to place all modules online, thus realizing Skinner's notion of a modular, scalable, dynamic, and easily accessible teaching machine that can be tailored to the individual learner's needs.

A fully developed onboarding program will likely be comprised of many modules. However, the author created a pilot program to serve as a case study as well as the nucleus for a future program. Consequently, the pilot program was implemented with three modules: campus orientation (culture and training), networking, and leadership and management.

**Module content.** Table 2, as well as appendix G, highlights the module content and expected outcomes of the onboarding program.

Table 2

*Module Content and Expected Outcomes*

Module	Title	Description	Learning Outcome
1	Culture & Training	An overview the college's culture and expectations, and how to get started as a MLA.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Complete required trainings</li> <li>• Creation of the onboarding plan</li> <li>• Understand the mission, vision and value of the college, as well as the President's expectations</li> <li>• How to purchase items.</li> </ul>
2	Networking	Create a map to navigate the organizational structures at the college.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Network creation</li> <li>• Become familiar with the college's organizational structure</li> </ul>

3	Leadership & Management	A brief overview on how to be a more effective leader and manager.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Understand the four leadership frames.</li> <li>• Create department goals.</li> <li>• Understand the cursory aspects of management</li> <li>• Become familiar with the hiring practices of the college.</li> </ul>
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***Culture and training model.*** The pilot onboarding program is comprised of three modules: culture and training, networking, and leadership and management. The culture and training module provided participant acclimation to the campus. This was done by providing information such as: the college's organizational chart, mapping out the campus, sharing the college's mission, vision, and values, and the various committees and their functions. Additionally there is the President's welcome video with what he expects from them, as well as information from Human Resources on required trainings (Appendix G).

***Networking model.*** The next module addresses networking. This module has exercises for the participant to complete. Subordinates and the supervisor outline the top people for the participant to meet and the conversation is initiated by the participant. The intent of these exercises is to develop the participants' on-campus network for resources and understanding how the college works (Appendix G).

***Leadership and training model.*** The last module addresses leadership and management principles. This module helps participants identify their natural strengths as a leader and determine what their management style is. Participants take Bolman & Deals Leadership Orientation Instrument-Self (LOI) (1990) and overlay them with information about leadership

and management. Additionally there is information about the collective bargaining agreement for both classified staff and faculty, with forms on how to evaluate employees and give feedback (Appendix G).

While Skinner's tenets guided the structure of the program, Knowles' tenets determined the nature of the content appropriate for these adult learners. Each module provides a learner with the rationale for needing to know the material. Introductory material explains what the module covers, why the material is important, and how it fits into the overall environment of the college.

Tapping into every learner's experience is problematic. Using classroom analogies when appropriate appears to have the most potential for making the material more accessible to the learner. Also, learning modules can include exercises that have the learner think about past experiences that illustrate the material covered by the module.

With a modular program, supervisor and learner can collaborate to arrive at a list of modules to be completed, as well as a sequence and time frame for their completion; thus, the learner's self-concept is taken into account. According to Knowles, this should increase the likelihood that the learner will actually complete each module.

Knowles' fourth tenet, readiness to learn, is very dependent upon the learner's attitude. By making the process available online, the learner can pursue a module when mentally prepared to do so, be it late at night, early in the morning, or even during the lunch break. If the learner feels the sequence of modules should be changed to fit a particular situation, the supervisor and learner can work together to arrive at a more effective sequence.

***Interactive learning.*** To promote orientation to learning, modules can leverage the power of case studies to develop problem-solving skills. If the module presents its expository

material and describes a problem, it can then provide the learner with an exercise that involves working out a solution to the problem. The module can then lead the learner through consideration of different approaches provided by the previously covered material. By comparing the module's solution with their own, learners can avail themselves of immediate feedback on their solution. The learner can also be encouraged to discuss the case study with their mentor/peer buddy, as suggested by Bauer and Erdogan (2011). This would also provide an opportunity for the learner and the supervisor to discuss the learner's solution and lead to a better understanding between learner and supervisor.

***Learner motivation.*** By making the commitment to a schedule of module completion dates, as well as a natural desire to become better at their job and advance their career, the author believes learners will be motivated to pursue their onboarding program. Alternatively, if they are not motivated enough to fill gaps in their knowledge and abilities, this raises the possibility that they are not truly invested in their position and may need to be replaced. For a certain percentage of any population, this will be the case. By being position-centric, encouraging problem solving, engaging learners by discussing their own experiences, and promoting the ability to pursue modules at their own pace and times of convenience, the program satisfies the four basic tenets of adult-centered learning.

***Personalization of learning.*** Finally, the process of working with the supervisor to select and sequence modules and arrive at deadlines, along with actually working through each module, provides the learner with a sense of self-direction. Providing all MLAs with a common core of learning and experiences will promote socialization of this training, aligning the program with the tenets of constructivist learning theory.

The online modality also aligns with the attributes of MLAs, who, as a group, are goal-oriented and seek content that is relevant, meaningful, and applicable to their role. Since Knowles' theory of adult learning posits that one needs to be internally motivated and goal-oriented to use this modality of learning, it appears to be an appropriate methodology. Further, Knowles espoused learning as a life-long process, with the adult learner taking responsibility (Billings & Halstead, 2005).

### **Participants.**

*Sample size for participants and focus groups.* Sampling is a process of selecting subjects to take part when researching a phenomenon, as they can provide information considered relevant to the research problem. Mack, Woodson, Macqueen, Guest & Namey, (2005) note that in most cases it is not possible to collect information from all members of target population of a research inquiry. For instance, all the employees at the community college may not volunteer to be a part of the study. Even if it is possible to do so, it is not essential to collect information from every employee that works at the community college in order to come up with valid and credible findings. Fundamentally the aims of research, as well as the features of the study population, influence the decision of which individuals and the number of individuals to select for a given research inquiry.

Researchers adopt one of the three sampling methods for qualitative research: convenience sample, purposeful sample, and theoretical sample (Mack, et al., 2005). This study used purposeful sampling technique and included MLAs and HLAs for the focus groups, as well as MLAs to participate in the onboarding program. The participant candidate pool was all new MLAs at the study's college campus; only those MLAs who accepted an invitation to participate had access to the pilot program. New MLAs were defined as employees who had worked at the

campus for twelve months or less. The identities of the participants were protected by the Onboarding Community College (OCC) pseudonym. Within the past year, the college hired twelve new MLAs; therefore, this was the potential sample size for participants for the onboarding program and four participants agreed to be a part of the study.

OCC's HR personnel used the author's parameters to identify potential MLAs and HLAs participants. The college has six HLAs and twenty three MLAs who have been at OCC for at least a year.

Participation was limited to no more than six members in each focus group and four participants for the pilot program. The overall sample size and diversity were limited by both the number of new MLAs, seasoned MLAs, and HLAs at OCC as well as how many of them wanted to participate in the study. While a larger participant pool would have been preferable, the final population satisfied Kvale's (2008) maxim: "interview as many subjects as necessary to find out what you need to know" (p. 101). Additionally, the author had to be mindful of the study participants' supervisors and respect the time needed to allow the MLAs to participate in the study. Three of the six HLAs and nine of the twenty three MLAs participated in the focus groups.

*Demographics of the participants and focus group members.* Three males and one female participated in the onboarding program. Two of the four participants had previous leadership experience in previous institutions, but their role at OCC was a promotion to a higher level of leadership. Two had no previous leadership experience prior to their MLA role at OCC. Two participants were from Student Services, one was from Administrative Services, and the last participant was from Instruction. The age groups represented in this sample were two between 30-39 years of age, one between 40-49 years of age, and one between 50-59 years of age.

The group members that participated in the HLA focus group were one vice president and two chiefs and were comprised of two females and one male. They represented Human Resources, Instruction, and Information Technology. Two represented the age group of 60-69 and one was between 50-59 years of age. As there were nine MLAs, the MLA focus group was split in to two groups. The first MLA group had one male, and five females; the second group had three females. The MLAs in group one represented Student Services, Instruction, and College Relations; group two members were from Student Services and Instruction. The age demographics in MLA group one were as follows: three in the age category of 30-39, one between 40-49, one between 50-59, and one between 60-69 years of age. The age breakdown in MLA group two was two between 30-39 years of age and one between 40-49 years old. This information is shown in Table 3 (Appendix H).

***Selection criteria for participants and focus groups.*** The participant pool was comprised solely of MLAs and HLAs.. There were three focus groups of current employees: two were comprised of MLAs and one was made up of HLAs. In order to get a mix of experiences, employees selected for the focus groups were new and existing employees who had worked for OCC for thirteen months or more. For the MLA focus group, if the MLA had worked at OCC for less than three years, they had to have held their MLA role in a previous institution for a minimum of two years. The MLAs participating in the pilot participant group worked at the test site for twelve or less months.

New employees might not have been as inclined to share the things that “do not” work, which may have limited and possibly skewed the data retrieved from the participants. Blending both MLAs who had made it past their probationary period and new employees offered more balance in answers to the participants in the onboarding program, as OCC has a probationary

period of six months. HR compiled a list of applicants that met the requirements of the study. These candidates were invited to be a part of the study with the appropriate letter and reply card. Each group had their own reply card depending on which part of the study they were candidates for: MLA onboarding participant group, MLA focus group, or HLA focus group.

*Participants' role in the onboarding program and in the focus groups.* The pilot program participants were responsible for completing all of the surveys within the onboarding program, which included a survey after each module and a comprehensive survey once all three modules were completed. The survey had structured questions about the program and space for participants to add additional thoughts and reflections about the module. Additionally the participants could give feedback throughout the experience, which some participants elected to provide. The author used these strategies to gauge the effectiveness of the program as well as identify changes to make to the module for future participants.

Additionally the pilot program participants were asked to read each page contained within the program, and this was verified electronically in the system by the time they spent within the onboarding program and their page views. The author was able to see how many page clicks and time the participant was in each module, as well as how long it took them to answer the module survey questions. The comprehensive survey was anonymous to lend to more candor in responses. The researcher focused on the fact that this in-depth survey encouraged people to reconstruct their experience actively within the context of their lives and their reality. Once the program was concluded, this survey served as a short debriefing session, where the participant was able to reflect on their experience to provide feedback.

The focus group participants were asked to give an hour to an hour and a half of their time to answer questions about when they were new to the college. Since there were two MLA

focus groups, group one lasted an hour and a half and group two lasted an hour. The HLA focus group lasted an hour as well.

The author considered these participants as partners in pursuing a line of questioning that offered new knowledge. Rubin and Rubin (2005) confirm this by writing, “the interviewees are partners in the research enterprise rather than subjects to be tested or examined” (p. 12). To reflect this active stance the word “participants” is used to refer to the people that were interviewed. Kvale (2008) agrees, “The research interview is an interpersonal situation, a conversation between two partners about a theme of mutual interest.” (p. 125). A dialogue balances advocating for their point of view as well as inquiring for understanding. The quality of the dialogue depends on the skill of the participant, as well as the skill of the interviewer.

The partnership for conducting effective research included providing participants with a context for doing a pre-briefing. The pre-briefing was done with each participant in person and prior to the individual’s starting the onboarding program. The purpose of the pre-briefing was to introduce the content as the author defined the situation for the subject, briefly discuss the purpose of the program and then ask the participants if they had any questions before starting (Kvale, 2008).

### **Instrumentation**

Four methods of instrumentation were used to gather metrics for this study: surveys, a questionnaire, Bolman & Deals LOI (1990), and focus group questions. The author selected these instrumentation techniques based on the research question. In assessing the relevance of each of these instruments, the author considered various attributes of each method; these included how long they would take to administer, how intuitive they were to use, how much learning would be required if their use was not intuitive, and how easily they would yield a

metric. The majority of the instruments were encapsulated in the online onboarding program, and administration times were negligible, since the program is self-paced. Furthermore, since the instrumentation was embedded in the program it was, for the most part, entirely transparent to the users. Thus, no learning time was required to put these tools to use.

Table 4 summarizes the instrumentation that was used, the target participant group, as well as the number of participants using each instrument.

Table 4

*Summary of Instrumentation Used for Study*

<u>Instrumentation Used</u>	<u>Participant Group</u>	<u>Total Number of Participants</u>
Surveys	Onboarding program MLA participants	4
Questionnaires	Onboarding program MLA participants	4
Bolman & Deals LOI	Onboarding program MLA participants	4
Focus Groups	HLA	3
	MLA	9

Since the participants in the onboarding program did not contact the author and the answers received from the module surveys were in-line with the questions, the assumption that the module survey directions were clear is validated. The comprehensive questionnaire garnered feedback in-line with the question, and no feedback or questions were given directly to the author. Since the questionnaire was correctly completed by all participants, one may assume that the directions were clear. Scoring the module surveys was straightforward since the author used the Likert scale for participants to provide survey feedback. However, reviewing the free text feedback from the comprehensive questionnaire required more complicated mapping and

assigning meaning to individual words in order to derive a metric for this format. Thus, the author needed to encode the information.

The HLA focus group did not need clarification or expansion of any of the questions or the instructions on how the focus group was to be conducted. The participants spoke freely and started out well focused on each question, but then frequently a response would spawn tangential conversations. Consequently, the author had to let the unintended conversation proceed a short while in the hopes of making a new, relevant discovery and then redirect or guide the participants back to the original topic of discussion. While the MLA focus groups did not have any questions regarding the instructions, some group members did have questions about the feedback questions. This indicates the feedback questions should be reworked to remove any vestiges of ambiguity.

As previously noted, free text responses gathered from the focus groups needed to be encoded in order for the data mining tool to analyze the results. Coding the information was based on a modification of grounded theory which began with categorization. In addition to categories, this theory consists of three elements: properties, a core category, and a hypothesis (Merriam, 2009). The core category is the central defining attribute of the phenomenon through which all other categories and hypotheses are related or interconnected. For the purposes of this study the core category was knowledge, skills, and abilities of MLAs. Normally, data mining tools are able to leverage an internal thesaurus to analyze large volumes of data with relatively little effort.

**Trustworthiness and Reliability.** Qualitative methods need to be systematic and must be reproducible by subsequent researchers, because these elements are central to acceptance by scientific communities (Berg, 1989). Merriam (1998) defined triangulation as “using multiple

investigators, multiple sources of data, or multiple methods to confirm the emerging findings” (p. 204). Triangulation using thematic content, membership categorization, and analysis of experience described in MLA and HLA narratives provided a trustworthy and reliable study. This method also involves using multiple techniques to either collect or analyze data (Cresswell, 2012). Trustworthiness in qualitative research is focused on themes that emerge, as well as the related categories that participants naturally used in discussing and describing themes within their group lens. Qualitative researchers strive for understanding, that deep structure of knowledge that comes from personally visiting with participants, while spending time in the field to adequately probe and uncover the truth in meanings (Cresswell, 2012). Reliability, from the standpoint of the author, participants, or readers of the study results, affords the study credibility (Cresswell, 2003). Lindolf and Taylor (2002) and Yin (2003) used terms of validity and reliability, while others used terms like reality and credibility of standards of structural collaboration, consensual validation, and referential adequacy (Creswell, 2012). For consistency and to facilitate understanding by readers of the results, the author selected the terms trustworthiness and reliability for use in reporting research results.

The author used three points of view for this study to facilitate triangulation via multiple data sets and measurements: HLA focus groups, MLA focus groups, and an MLA participant group (Merriam, 2009) as a means to establish trustworthiness and reliability in this qualitative research. The focus is on whether the results are consistent with the data collected. This increases the probability of detecting inconsistencies, omissions, distortions, and disconnects. Thus, if the findings of the study are consistent with the data presented, one may consider the study reliable (Merriam, 2009).

## **Data Collection Procedures**

The author collected data through three focus groups, as well as surveys and feedback in the onboarding program. Focus groups were selected as a data collection tool as they have several advantages when used to evaluate a program. It is highly effective as a collection technique as the interviewer can gather information from a multitude of individuals at once (Patton, 1987). Focus groups also tend to provide a natural check and balance system as participants hear each other's responses. This affords participants a way to correct extreme views and to focus on the most important issues (Patton, 1987). Finally, "focus groups work best for topics people could talk about to each other in their everyday lives, but don't" (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004, p.65).

After a year of informal conversations with Directors of International Studies and Directors of International Education, as this was a group of people the author interacted with regularly, the scope of the study was developed to formally include focus groups. The composition of the two MLA focus groups were comprised of MLAs who had held their position at OCC for at least thirteen months, but had been a dean or director for at least three or more years, whether at OCC or another institution. Focus group interviews are typically comprised of six to eight people who participate in the interview for one-half to two hours (Patton, 1987). Nine participants volunteered for this study so the author divided the group into two focus group sessions. There were six in one group and three in the second group and the rationale for splitting the group was to afford participants not to be in the same focus group as their direct supervisor. The time spent with one MLA focus group was an hour and a half and the second focus group lasted an hour.

Merriam (1998) recommends asking focus groups approximately ten major questions; the MLA group was presented with eleven. In order to refine these questions, the author presented preliminary questions to MLAs at a campus other than the college serving as a test site. These MLA responses provided the feedback for the final questions given to the study MLA focus group so the questions would be as clear and succinct as possible. Once the new question sets were synthesized, they were resubmitted to the non-study MLA group to ensure the questions would elicit responses in line with the questions.

The HLA focus group interview took an hour and the three participants were asked three questions. These study participants also read and signed a *University of Washington Online Onboarding of Community College Mid-Level Administrators Consent Form-HLA Focus Group* (Appendix I)

The author conducted these in-depth focus group interviews with MLAs and HLAs in order to "... learn what happened in a specific instance" (Rubin & Rubin, 2005, p. 6), allowing the author to obtain additional information and perspective on the data. In this case, the focus was to understand what components are needed for an onboarding process at OCC. The in-depth focus group interviews allowed the author to assess the effect of not having an onboarding program and to make recommendations for the online onboarding program based on feedback from MLAs at OCC who had no prior onboarding experience at the college. The in-depth focus group interviews were audio-recorded to preserve them for later analysis, while the author asked questions and took notes on the participants' behaviors and reactions. The audio recording was then transcribed verbatim to afford the best database for analysis. This database was then coded utilizing QDA Miner Lite (n.d.).

Rubin and Rubin (2005) recommend that an interviewer have much experience with interpersonal skills in order to hear what the interviewee is saying both verbally and nonverbally. The author's experience and training, with over 20 years of working with cross-cultural communication, conducting interviews with potential employees, coaching employees, and counseling performance, afforded the author a great deal of expertise in the area of one-on-one communication. Some participants had keen memories, some spoke tentatively, and others gave speculative conclusions. Being aware that people communicate differently enabled the author to ask participants to elaborate when needed.

The author asked participants in the MLA focus group questions about their experiences as new employees. The focus group questions were stated in very broad terms in order to avoid biasing participants' responses by the way the questions were phrased (Appendices A-C). The HLA focus group questions were centered on what HLAs would like to see in knowledge, skills, and abilities in the MLAs and what they were not initially seeing within their MLA pool (Appendix C). Identifying what components were lacking in MLAs will help define future relevant onboarding practices.

The Leadership Orientation Instrument-Self developed by Bolman and Deal (1990), was used to collect data for the individuals in the pilot program. This tool measured and identified the perceived organizational frames of leadership: human resource, political, structural, and symbolic. Based on how a participant answered the survey they were able to see the primary frame of orientation they operated from compared to others. The participant could then pursue information on their frame of orientation, as well as develop the other frames if they chose to do so.

Once the data was collected, it was triangulated using the constant comparative method which compares sets of data for similarity and consistency (Creswell, 2003; Merriam, 2009). By using the constant comparative method, the author categorized their observations and participants words or phrases. “A unit of data can be as small as a word a participant uses to describe a feeling or a phenomenon, or as large as several pages of field notes describing a particular incident” (Merriam, 2009).

These categories were examined for similarities and consistencies to ensure they were supported by the data and can be used to support the purpose of this study (Creswell; 2012; Merriam, 2009). Shupp (2007) stated “category refinement is an ongoing process throughout the data analysis” and that when using this method it is “important to allow such categories to fit the data rather than putting the data into preselected categories” (p. 60). The creation of categories for this study was based on the data that emerged and not the projected outcomes. The emergent theme process helps to extract and focus on the data that is collected. Repetitive themes are the easily recognized words, actions or behaviors the participant repeats often throughout the focus group interview process. Resonant metaphors differ from repetitive themes because they are not words or actions that are repeated often, but words or phrases that capture an experience or culture by more than one participant. For example, two interviewees might have similar experiences, but express them with different words. These shared experiences present a theme. The MLAs in both MLA focus groups shared the experience of “faking it, until you make it” though they shared the idea in different ways.

### **Interview design**

Basic communication skills, listening, probing, mirroring, paraphrasing, using effective body language, asking clarifying and probing questions were all important skills for the author to

use when interviewing participants. Designing the interview questions was only a part of effective interviewing; adeptly using interpersonal communication skills during the interview was the other. In an interview, the questions started from a broad scope, leading to a more narrow scope. Open-ended questions were needed to allow the participants to expand on their answers. Rubin and Rubin (2005) describe the design of interview questions as structured conversations. Interviews were constructed by combining main questions, follow-up questions, and probes. Main questions were worked out in advance to make sure all major parts of the research problem are covered; and follow-up questions asked for explanation of themes, concepts, or events that the interviewee has introduced. Probes help managed the conversation by keeping it on topic, signaling the desired level of depth, and asking for examples or clarification.

Rubin and Rubin (2005) discuss a type of interview referred to as *a tour*: “participants act more or less as guides, walking the interviewer through their turf while pointing out what they think is important on the way.” (p.160). Tour-style interviewing allows the interviewer to better understand the world of the person being interviewed, while avoiding biasing the interviewee’s response. This technique can also prompt responses from the interviewee that otherwise would not be garnered. In the research process, it is important to not only be aware of the words that are spoken, but also the unspoken story of culture that is often shared through action or facial expression (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2005).

### **Ethical Considerations**

This includes knowledge about and understanding of ethical issues present when human subjects are involved. Special attention was necessary to assure no adverse impact on the HLAs or MLAs involved. This meant splitting the MLA focus group so that subordinates and

supervisors were not in the same focus group. Key ethical issues that were considered regarding interactions between the author and participants included:

1. Respect: individuals were treated as confidential participants;
2. Beneficence: no harm came to participants for inclusion or exclusion from study;
3. Justice: subjects were treated in an equitable and fair manner.

**Confidentiality and consent procedures for participants and focus groups.** A vital part of performing research with participants was abiding by the OCC and University of Washington Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines for the protection of human participants per federal regulations. The completion of the CITI training basic course and the specialized course on employees as research subjects in anticipation of the study provided a solid base for conducts of an ethical study (Author, 2013). The Belmont Report generated by Department of Health, Education, and Welfare in 1979 (National Commission on the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) forms the foundation for the CITI courses. To remain compliant with these guidelines, the author successfully completed the IRB applications of both institutions and requested that all participants comply with and sign a copy of the IRB guidelines.

Maintaining confidentiality for all participants was essential. Careful writing of the study report, as well as creating a pseudonym for the institution used for the study, reduced the possibility of identifying specific participants. Other precautions included procuring the necessary approvals and obtaining letters of consent from all participants. The letters of consent provided each participant with full study details. Focus groups were recorded with prior approval from the participants, as stated in the IRB application each MLA and HLA focus group study participant read and signed a *University of Washington Online Onboarding of Community*

*College Mid-Level Administrators Consent Form-MLA or HLA Focus Group* (Appendices I-J).

Onboard participants signed a *University of Washington Online Onboarding of Community*

*College Mid-Level Administrators Consent Form-Onboarding Participant* (Appendix K).

The digitally recorded focus group sessions were transcribed using Rev software (n.d.), with author's review to ensure accuracy. For storage purposes, the recordings were stored onto DVDs after transcription and will be destroyed, per the IRB application in June, 2016. The focus groups data coding eliminated all name and location references for confidentiality reasons. The code and name lists remain in secured storage, separated from the DVD copies and interview transcripts. All interview, data analysis, and materials will remain locked in the author's office and then destroyed through shredding no later than 30 June 2016.

### **Data Analysis**

This section presents the data analyzed for this study which examines the perceived topics needed for MLAs to be onboarded at OCC. Questions were designed to capture seasoned MLA experiences on what they wish they knew, but didn't or what they wish they had, but didn't; new MLA experiences and what they want to know; and what is needed from the HLA's lens.

Using multiple methods, through use of triangulation enables a complementary analysis of data. For this study, triangulation using three analysis methods gave greater validity to interpretation of results (Babbie, 2001; Berg, 1989; Cooper & Schindler, 2008). By interpreting and correlating the MLA focus group themes, the HLA focus group themes, and the MLAs participating in the online onboarding program themes the overall analysis was richer and more complete. This triangulation through multiple analysis methods provided an in-depth investigation of MLA's onboarding experience.

The data was collected in the form of participant surveys and feedback, the author's notes collected from all focus group interviews, and the transcription of all focus group interviews. Interviews were audio recorded to preserve source materials, and questions were based on standardized oral questions. As themes were identified, they were written down and organized utilizing the computer software program QDA Miner Lite (Appendix L).

There were three and a half hours of dialogue collected from the focus group participants. The raw data of audio recording and the author's notes were reviewed and coded into categories and then recoded for emerging themes within those categories. The coded transcripts recompiled and correlated with the online onboarding participant's feedback, survey results, and final questionnaires to produce the final results of triangulation. The statements from the HLA focus groups that were not specifically focused on MLAs were discarded.

The themes from the onboarding participant's feedback and survey results and focus groups were triangulated to see the patterns or unique experiences that were present within the data. For this study triangulation included data from (a) three surveys, one comprehensive questionnaire, and feedback from the pilot program participants, (b) answers from the MLA focus groups, and (c) responses from the HLA focus group. These sources provided three discrete, but related perspectives: what new MLAs felt they gained, what seasoned MLAs felt they needed when they were started out, and what HLAs would like to see in MLAs, that they are not currently seeing on campus by MLAs. Using triangulation, the author was able to view the onboarding process through a leadership lens to discern patterns and emergent themes to make the final recommendations for a core onboarding program.

When searching for meaning, the author looked for patterns and consistency within the data. Although sometimes a single incident may have been significance, normally, important

meanings arise from repeated appearances (Stake, 1995). The author's search for patterns or the significance through direct interpretation, including their observations is in the final report.

The final step in revealing patterns was the identification of themes amongst the data that impart a theory or shared experience (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 2005). By examining convergent themes, a researcher can detect patterns in the data. The data underwent analysis for thematic content and membership categorization to provide separate views of the data and an analysis of their interrelationships (Appendix M). In the study, the MLA's provided their individual experiences in undergoing the onboarding process and the surveys provided the aggregation of multiple cases. The cases underwent an analysis using various methods to provide greater reliability of results.

### **Findings and Discussions**

The qualitative exploration of MLA onboarding revealed themes that logically exist when looking at the position within the organization. When a person enters an institution, the experience is filled with excitement and uncertainty at the same time. Too often, that excitement is dampened when an MLA do not even know how to do basic things like order office supplies because they are not onboarded.

#### **Findings**

The findings come from onboarding pilot program participants (PPPs) completing three onboarding modules in Canvas, as well as in the form of key themes emerging from HLA and MLA focus groups and from PPPs' optional feedback. The key themes the author believes constitute the main findings of this study. Due to the small participant pool, no statistical analysis was used in this study.

**PPP activity statistics and module survey responses.** There were four (4) PPPs, who accessed the online onboarding program designed by the author on one to four different days. Each participant recorded between 79 and 132 page views, taking between 4 and 7 actions (representing optional feedback), with the total time spent on the three onboarding modules ranging between 26 and 73 minutes. Out of the three modules, Module 2 appears to have been devoted the least time by the participants, with 6.5 minutes on average, while Module 3 – the most, with an average of 23.5 minutes. The two participants who made the transition from director to dean spent the least total time in the pilot onboarding program, while the two other participants coming into a director role spent the most time, with particularly marked differences in Module 1 (23.5 minute vs. 8 minute average) and Module 3 (31.5 minute vs. 15.5 minute average) relative to the two new deans (Appendix L).

Table 5

*Participant times and page views are summarized in.*

Participant	Module 1 Time (min)	Module 2 Time (min)	Module 3 Time (min)	Total Page Views
A	26	8	39	120
B	21	6	24	132
C	6	5	22	107
D	10	7	9	79

Each module contained a brief survey with three to four questions on the four-point Likert scale (from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree). Module 1 survey indicated that all four participants strongly agreed that having an onboarding program online was convenient to them, with all agreeing or strongly agreeing that it would also help them learn how to accomplish tasks at OCC and align their performance goals with those of the college and college leadership. Three of the four participants agreed or strongly agreed that the onboarding experience would help

them understand the culture of the college, with one disagreeing. Module 2's survey indicated that three of the four participants strongly agreed that the onboarding would help build relationships needed to effectively perform their role, with one disagreeing. All four participants agreed or strongly agreed the onboarding experience helped them understand the organizational structure and how their role relates to other roles within the college. Finally, when asked to select between having an online onboarding or no onboarding, all four participants strongly agreed they'd prefer to have the online onboarding program. Module 3 survey responses were mostly split equally between those disagreeing and those agreeing or strongly agreeing, including on questions relating to building a leadership team within the department and receiving timely feedback from direct reports and direct supervisor. In a three-to-one split (agree vs. disagree), PPPs indicated that onboarding experience will help match individual leadership strategy with the current environment in the department.

**Emerging common feedback themes.** Reviewing focus group members' comments, as well as PPP feedback, yielded six common themes bearing on MLAs' expected and actual skills and knowledge, as well as factors that could facilitate or hinder a new MLA's quick assimilation. These included:

1. information asymmetry
2. lack of clear, documented expectations about job duties
3. cursory formal orientation
4. importance of mentors, peer buddies, and informal support groups
5. "state of flux"
6. importance of emotional intelligence, management and leadership skills

*Theme 1: Information asymmetry as an important factor during MLA hiring.* Akerloff (1970) uses the analogy of buying a used car to illustrate the concept of information asymmetry. A buyer does not know whether or not the used car has problems since they cannot always ascertain the relevant variables: quality and frequency of car maintenance, the previous owner's driving style, and accident history. Therefore buyers tend to assume that a used car is of average quality. Sellers of better-than-average cars may not be able to prove this fact to a buyer so they may not find it worthwhile to sell their vehicles. As a result, the buyer feels the seller is asking too much for their average quality car and the seller believes the buyer was not willing to pay enough to get a higher quality car. In the end, if a transaction occurs, at least one party is dissatisfied.

In the MLA recruitment context, many essential competencies (like effective leadership, project management, or emotional intelligence skills) can be virtually impossible to ascertain prior to hiring and observing a new MLA in action. Given the studies in the literature review sections that indicate new MLAs generally have certain key competencies inadequately developed when they come into their new roles; the hiring team would likely to be skeptical of applicants' self-serving claims in those areas. A typical applicant would lack a credible way to communicate strong skills in those areas; while individuals with weaker-than-average skills in those areas may, whether purposefully (with an obvious incentive to be hired and learn relevant competencies on the job) or due to inaccurate self-evaluation of competence, rate themselves higher than they objectively are. Thus, disclosure of even the candidate's honestly-held belief about own abilities in a particular area may not be of much use to the recruiting team in accessing actual competency levels. These general theoretical concepts found strong support in the data, as outlined below.

*Group findings.* Since leadership and management skills are hard to quickly verify, likely to be in need of improvement, and crucial to MLA success, the perspectives provided by the three distinct groups focused on the aspects important to the group. Skill observations and potential offboarding of MLAs brought forth a strategy of having to fake it until you make it from the MLA focus groups. The reflections of finding the management/leadership module to be too generic or not very useful, thus effectively communicating they have these general skills (which all MLAs would have an incentive to do given potential negative consequences) for PPPs.

*Focus groups.* The HLA focus group members noted their inability to fully verify a candidate's claims during the hiring process, going on to discuss a potential need for eventually "off-boarding" some newly hired MLAs who demonstrated inadequate key competencies after being hired. Relatedly, MLA focus group members acknowledged an occasional need to "fake it to make it" – that is, to misrepresent one's own competencies while trying to acquire/learn them.

*Participant group.* This theme was not mentioned directly in the PPP group's questionnaire or feedback responses. One participant did mention that onboarding information focusing on leadership and emotional intelligence "felt somewhat insulting"; believing having those skills was the reason for being hired. One participant mentioned that Module 1's information raised some questions as to what "training exactly my current staff has had on some of the same issues," revealing possible information asymmetry between MLA and the participant's direct reports regarding the subordinates' competency levels in performing specific tasks.

***Theme 2: Lack of clear expectations about job duties; absent/incomplete/outdated documentation on existing processes and procedures.***

*Group findings.* Common sense suggests that individuals new to an organization (or a specific role) would want clarity of expectations and well-documented relevant processes and procedures to follow. Yet, codifying expectations and procedures may not be a priority, particularly where MLAs are replaced very infrequently, and the existing MLA is the individual who knows relevant duties and processes the best. HLAs recognized this by mentioning the importance of learning how things are done (institutional history), MLA focus groups repeatedly shared their frustrations about having to learn by making mistakes, with some engaging in a concerted effort to codify relevant processes, while PPPs noting such information, provided by the onboarding program, would also be useful to train their subordinates.

*Focus groups.* Lack of clear expectations as to job duties, interaction with other stakeholders on campus, and absent/incomplete/outdated documentation of existing processes and procedures emerged as a recurring theme as the MLA focus groups' participants shared their experiences. The HLAs' related terminology included references to "history" and "how it works". While MLAs did not share a common vernacular like the HLAs, they placed a heavy emphasis on learning relevant processes, as well as organizational decision-making hierarchy. The common theme was that, in spite of the importance of these knowledge areas, they are inadequately documented and thus among the most challenging initial aspects of MLAs' new positions.

*Participant group.* While the onboarding program is designed, to a large extent, to quickly remedy insufficient understanding of history and processes, several PPPs noted the information and tools would be useful in educating their direct reports. They also mentioned a

desire to have job-related information on specific systems, tasks and processes, including budgeting, financial aid, advising, purchasing, hiring, and goal development. One participant commented that a new MLA must first focus “on understanding the college, processes, and the people”. Another mentioned having to do research, early on, about issues like financial aid, to be able to properly direct students.

***Theme 3: cursory formal orientation; new MLAs’ reliance on existing staff and MLA-developed internal or external networks to fill gaps identified by Theme 2.***

*Group findings.* Lacking thorough onboarding, MLAs had to reach out to individuals within (both subordinates and superiors) and without the organization (external peers; if organization lacks institutional knowledge about specific relevant aspects of the position). While this may help establish and develop networks, an important success factor both HLAs and MLAs commented on, such process is obviously less efficient than having access to well-documented procedures. Additionally MLAs may have reservations about revealing what they don’t know to avoid appearing ill-prepared to be successful in their roles to their superiors.

*Focus groups.* While none of the focus group MLAs shared having a strong orientation process, many mentioned having support from people within the organization, from long-term administrative staff to mentors and peers (including external colleagues), as well as direct supervisors and HLAs. Ability to ask questions, be open to feedback, as well as networking, were identified by MLAs both as successful KSAs they had and as the tools they employed to reach out across campus in their quest to learn both processes and people relevant for their new positions

*Participant group.* Listening to and developing a rapport with direct reports, understanding what services certain departments offer, reaching out to individuals one “might

not typically cross paths with to further those connections”, and being introduced to “initial people that you need to connect with” were some of the theme comments made by PPPs.

***Theme 4: Importance of mentors, peer buddies, and informal support groups.***

*Group findings.* HLAs, MLA focus groups, and PPPs reaffirmed importance of such support documented in prior research by Bauer & Erdogan (2011), with HLAs mentioning specific support communities, while MLAs stressing the need for such individuals not to be in their chain of command and informal feedback on relating to specific individuals, as well as that such support should complement the training received through an onboarding program. The author is encouraged that several MLAs reported unsolicited feedback and offers of assistance from OCC community.

*Focus groups.* The MLA focus groups revealed a strong and recurring desire for a mentor or peer buddy who is not in the specific MLA’s chain of command (or specific department), as well as an informal support group which, while not part of a formal orientation process, would meet periodically and provide useful “pothole warning” feedback. Such an arrangement could greatly increase the likelihood of new employees avoiding potentially damaging mistakes stemming from the early lack of both knowledge of institutional processes and emotional intelligence-related knowledge and skills.

*Participant group.* One PPP mentioned being “very fortunate to have several individuals reach out to me”, with the individuals becoming great mentors and sharing information about college culture and resources. Another stated it would be important for existing MLAs to make an effort to reach out to and connect with new MLAs.

***Theme 5: Additional challenges for new MLAs when the institution is undergoing major change (in the “state of flux”).***

*Group findings.* This theme came through the strongest, by far, in MLA focus groups, which the author attributes to the timing of the major organizational change roughly coinciding with when these MLAs came onboard. As the new vision, direction, and procedures started to take shape, the “state of flux” would be much less pronounced from the PPPs’ perspective.

*Focus groups.* The “state of flux” (higher current uncertainty or “dynamic shift”), mentioned by the MLA focus groups’ participants, is believed to be somewhat unique to the test site. If current processes are in a state of flux because of a recent major change in leadership and resulting change in vision (or direction), it may be hard (or impossible) to effectively ascertain and learn either the current or target-state processes. For example, a focus group MLA mentioned that the position’s job responsibilities were defined through a managed negotiation process, while another shared a desire to have had a job description dialogue early on. Yet another MLA complained that the state of flux made it difficult to learn current processes.

*Participant group.* This theme was not mentioned in PPP group’s questionnaire or feedback responses.

***Theme 6: Importance of emotional intelligence, management, and leadership skills.***

*Group findings.* All groups addressed the importance of these skills, which is aligned with research and SBCTC recognition of their crucial nature for MLAs to enable organizational success. Being a subject matter expert in a particular (technical) field does not necessarily correlate with having good emotional intelligence, management, and leadership skills, so it is hardly surprising that MLAs new to an administrative role would find developing these skills most useful, as evidenced by feedback from several of the PPPs.

*Focus groups.* The HLAs emphasized emotional intelligence skills, including congeniality, collaboration, and networking as part of perceived successful KSAs for MLAs. They also commented on the importance of understanding the collaborative nature of work, flexibility, and ability to rally (lead) people toward a vision, while gradually narrowing the big picture in order to target state processes. Ability to effectively manage a diverse team and conflict resolution skill were also mentioned as rarely-observed KSAs. Being able to encourage and motivate people to use their initiative to come up with solutions while, at the same time, having to reject their proposals without crushing their enthusiasm emerged as yet another important MLA ability. Getting to know others, building coalitions, networking, and rebuilding trust, both across campus and externally, was a key theme in the focus groups.

*Participant group.* Surprisingly, several PPPs found the onboarding module on management and leadership skills to be the least valuable, mentioning that the materials were too restrictive and generic, yet suggesting “the content could be better crafted”. One PPP noted that leadership development elements were “a reach in this forum”. Yet, some PPPs believed that understanding the people and spending time to get to know employees and supervisor was important.

## **Discussion**

The author’s first discussion point involves the reliability of the study. Three separate groups were asked questions from three separate lenses and their answers overlapped one another: HLAs view on what MLA’s need help with from seasoned MLAs stating they needed help, to new MLAs stating what was helpful for them in the onboarding program. Even though the sample size was small, the study was reliable.

Theme 1 brought forth the idea of information asymmetry and adverse selection. When candidates, for reasons discussed above, are unable to credibly signal the quality of their relevant competencies, candidates with higher-than-average quality may find average-quality-based job offers unappealing. This concept is inherently present in MLA hiring decisions and surfaced during HLA and MLA focus group discussions as noted in the findings section. There was a feeling in the MLA focus group to misrepresent or even fabricate their experiences and accomplishments. This proved to be an unexpected finding that could have a significant influence on the optimal design of an onboarding program. This lack of honest information-sharing with an MLA's superiors (or even peers and subordinates) manifests itself in group-specific phrases. The HLA focus group frequently spoke of "poor fit" and "off-boarding". Conversely, MLAs often felt "ill-prepared" and untrained for their new positions. If the institution is incapable of remedying skill deficiencies, it may be expected to dismiss or reassign the underperforming MLA once it confirms the skill deficiency through on-the-job observation. Thus, the institution incurs more expenses to replace the MLA and the MLA, who – with proper coaching – might have become a very effective leader, will leave with a feeling of failure and a blemish on their professional record.

This also provides collateral insight into the low number of volunteers for this study, particularly among new MLAs, who might view their participation as job-threatening, since they might believe that their onboarding study performance could potentially reveal their lack of certain competencies, something that was indirectly confirmed by the HLA focus group.

The HLA focus group identified another aspect of information asymmetry by mentioning perceived importance of MLAs being able to recognize the difference between coaching (skill issue) and counseling (willingness issue), noting these are often confused "because somebody

will cop an attitude to cover up a skill deficiency.” Yet, if a disclosed skill deficiency could lead to MLAs losing their new jobs, they would clearly have a strong incentive to “cover up” their deficiency. Consequently, lack of an adequate training program can exacerbate this problem. Based on conversations with all focus groups, the author believes there may also be considerable uncertainty as to which skill deficiencies are viewed by relevant decision-makers as fatal. The optimal onboarding process should mitigate some (or even most) of this uncertainty via specific program modules – which could signal to both groups that the institution has the capacity to teach the skills covered by all of the onboarding modules and is willing to give MLAs a chance to augment their skill sets. By doing so, HLAs might be less inclined to dismiss an MLA with a skill deficiency, and an MLA might be more forthcoming with their shortcomings (or at least strive to remediate them before they become problematic). In turn, the institution could gain a reputation as a beneficial destination for a career path, thus assisting the institution with recruiting and retaining talent. SBCTC (Whetham, 2015), among others, already recognizes that “MLAs do not typically come with a skill set needed to successfully manage or lead” (Vicker & Royer, 2005, p. 5). A comprehensive onboarding program with tightly-scoped modules that explicitly target likely skill deficiencies in these general areas may reduce uncertainty and significantly alleviate potential problems stemming from information asymmetry. Through the onboarding program, the first module was extremely useful to all participants, whereas the other two modules had mixed feedback regarding their usefulness. The author gleaned that each MLA comes to the college with different skill sets; so having one module introducing the college, policies and procedures for getting things done, and the organization’s culture is optimal. MLAs can access subsequent modules depending on what they feel they need, whether it is how to network, budget training, or even how to manage subordinates. This also captures Knowles’

theory of andragogy as this would allow an MLA to be a self-directed learner (Knowles et al., 2012).

Interestingly enough, one of the PPPs may have, via the comment about the leadership module being “insulting”, inadvertently provided an example when an individual might “cop an attitude” to cover up a skill deficiency, especially in light of the above findings from other research studies. Yet, some MLAs will come into their new positions with an already well-developed management and leadership skill set; therefore, the author believes including the leadership and management training could highlight the skills that are important to the college campus and refresh such skills if needed. In addition, expecting all MLAs to review relevant training modules in Module 1 would help to ensure that all MLAs use a consistent and well-defined relevant terminology, thus reducing potential for miscommunication and confusion. The PPP feedback revealed that there may be an information asymmetry problem between the new MLAs and their subordinates – so modules of the onboarding program could also be employed to help ensure that subordinates understand the relevant processes and procedures of the college as well.

As the MLA focus groups’ participants shared their experiences, the lack of clear expectations as to job duties, interactions with other stakeholders on campus, and absent/incomplete/outdated documentation of existing processes and procedures emerged as a strong theme. The author believes such reflections reinforce the importance of mechanisms aimed at a more comprehensive and accurate information sharing during MLA recruitment and hiring process. Even though this phase precedes the onboarding process, the design, implementation, and regular maintenance of an effective and flexible onboarding program could potentially inform effective solutions to the information asymmetry problem, which could

otherwise trigger the need for off-boarding of new MLAs, which institutions would likely want to avoid. The author feels that one can use these insights regarding expectations to refine the onboarding program by creating modules that would help MLAs discover and acquire the needed skill sets. An example of this would be the pathway program, which allows students to be on a guided pathway for their program, which closes the gap on student completion rates. This is a relatively new concept so MLAs need training around what the scope of the pathway program is and how to implement it effectively for students. Feedback from PPPs reinforced the need for collecting and conveniently providing relevant information.

Bolman and Deal's (2008) four-framed leadership model as a theoretical framework yielded another discussion point: both the HLA and MLA focus groups conversations brought to fruition an emphasis on the Structural Frame, including expectations, specialized roles, formal relationships, responsibilities, rules, policies and procedures. The Human Resources Frame was also frequently mentioned, with the Political Frame also mentioned on occasion by focus groups' participants. This points to the importance of having clearly labeled modules so when something changes the module can easily be updated so that the program always stays current with the policies and procedures of the college.

The Human Resources (HR) Frame, although not explicitly mentioned as such, prominently figured in both HLA and MLA focus groups. The HLAs emphasized emotional intelligence skills, including congeniality, collaboration, and networking as part of perceived success KSAs. They also commented on the importance of understanding the collaborative nature of work, flexibility, and ability to rally (lead) people toward a vision, while gradually narrowing the big picture in order to target state processes. Ability to effectively manage a diverse team and conflict resolution skill were also mentioned as rarely-observed KSAs. Being

able to encourage and motivate people to use their initiative to come up with solutions while, at the same time, having to reject their proposals without crushing their enthusiasm emerged as yet another important MLA ability. These tie seamlessly into the HR Frame's family metaphor for an organization.

Even though the Structural Frame is of considerable importance for both MLAs and HLAs, the focus groups revealed that HR Frame is in the forefront for many, especially for those making a transition into an administrative management role. This is frequently manifested by describing the new role as being ill-defined. Getting to know others, building coalitions, networking, and rebuilding trust, both across campus and externally, was a key theme in the focus groups so it was not surprising to the author that the majority of the onboarding participants favored this module as well. To broadly summarize two key findings of this study, "people" of the HR Frame and "processes" of the Structural Frame were the most frequently recurring themes. Therefore, it is hardly a surprise that it was becoming familiar with relevant people and processes that the MLAs found the most challenging. Culture, people, and processes were also consistently mentioned by PPPs, including in the responses as to what they would recommend to a new MLA and as to what they found to be the most valuable during their pilot onboarding experience.

The author believes the study resonates surprisingly well with Oud's (2008) new librarian-focused study, which identified a workplace's politics and culture, as well as how to accomplish tasks, as being the hardest for new employees to learn. Procedures, resources, structures, conflict management, and relationship, which Oud (2008) mentions as new employee challenges, are echoed in the focus group and PPP comments in this study.

Participants in the MLA focus group highlighted the test site's high level of flux (higher current uncertainty, dynamic shift). While some level is to be expected at any site, the author believes the test site is in an abnormally high state of flux due to a recent major change in leadership. The resultant change in vision (or direction), may make it difficult (or impossible) for MLAs to ascertain and learn either the current or target-state processes – yet, this provides excellent opportunities within the Bolman and Deal's (2008) Political and Symbolic Frames. For example, a focus group MLA member mentioned that the position's job responsibilities were defined through a managed negotiation process, while another mentioned a desire to have had a job description dialogue early on. Yet another MLA complained that the state of flux made it difficult to learn current processes. At the same time, one of the MLAs underscored the importance of documenting processes by disclosing that they had spent the past couple of years on an effort to collect and document many of relevant processes, believing doing so made learning and compliance easier for new MLAs. While the "state of flux" or a variant thereof did not come up in PPPs' feedback comments, the author believes this may be due to the fact that, by the time these newer MLAs started their new positions, the level of uncertainty may have declined somewhat due to the new vision and direction being better understood by the college community.

The theoretical importance of mentors and peer buddies discussed in the literature review was also resoundingly present in the comments of both the HLA and the MLA focus groups. Both groups recognized the need for a more informal resource for questions and experience sharing for new MLAs. Employees who have been at the institution longer can provide the history, as well as knowledge of formal and "backchannel" methods, for getting things done. The HLAs mentioned both of these aspects repeatedly. One of the PPP group members also

mentioned being “very thankful for peers that reached out to me very early on”, subsequently recommending that existing MLAs make an effort to reach out to and connect with new MLAs.

While none of the focus group MLAs shared having a strong orientation process, many mentioned having support from people within the organization, from long-term administrative staff to mentors and peers (including external colleagues), as well as direct supervisors and HLAs. Ability to ask questions, be open to feedback, as well as networking, were identified by MLAs both as successful KSAs they had and as the tools they employed to reach out across campus in their quest to learn both processes and people relevant for their positions. Several PPP participants also mentioned that a structured onboarding process would be valuable to new employees, with Module 1 and Module 2 information being viewed as useful by most and noted missing from the original orientation process they had when they first came to the college.

Interestingly enough, Module 3, which focused on leadership and management, the skills the literature review suggests new MLAs may lack and desire training in, also treated as crucial for success by the HLA focus group, received mixed reviews by pilot program participants. The PPPs described Module 3 elements as “too restrictive”, “too generic”, and “a reach in this forum” in response to the question asking to discuss the least valuable elements of the onboarding experience. This observed outcome could be driven by several different factors. One of the factors is that half (two) of the PPPs were transitioning from a director position to a dean position; thus, they were not “brand new” to an MLA role, likely having developed relevant leadership and management skills prior to being hired into their new position. Unsurprisingly, such individuals would likely find general management and leadership training, something they have already learned, mastered, and applied in a practical setting, less useful. Another potential factor is that the information in the management and leadership onboarding module, unlike

detailed information about college-specific culture, processes, and people in Modules 1 and 2, was too generic and insufficiently tailored to a MLA's specific needs or wants.

One participant also commented on a particular presentation being 112 slides long and not having "time for this". Breaking onboarding modules' materials into more manageable, shorter documents focusing on a subset of relevant issues could encourage the adult learners to more actively review what they believe is particularly relevant for their new roles. Since one of the MLA focus group members mentioned being "bone tired" early on in the new role, it would be important, in designing an onboarding program, to take time constraints of its future participants into account. If a PPP did not have time for a 112-slide presentation, newly hired MLAs may likewise fail to devote sufficient time – not because they don't have a desire to learn, but simply because they have prioritize allocation of their time. Thus, while a plethora of resources may be useful and made readily available, one designing an onboarding program should strive to avoid information overload, both carefully vetting the resources included and making relevant modules easily customizable. The designer of the onboarding program should highlight mandatory segments in the module topic list or make explicit topics tend to be skill deficiencies that can be fatal to the MLAs career at the institution. The program should be easy to change so that when onboarding two new MLAs in different roles and with varying levels of experience could overlap with respect to college culture and certain college-wide processes, while the rest of the onboarding experience can, and should, in the author's opinion, be highly customizable. For example, one participant mentioned wanting information on interaction of MLA's position with two specific departments, while another, "an administrator overseeing multiple budgets" shared that college-specific high-level budget training would have been helpful. Of course, given that all PPPs spent just over an hour or less on all three modules, actual

onboarding program implementation, slated to span several months as designed, could alleviate some of the concerns shared by the pilot program participants. Onboarding program implementation should also estimate the time it would take a participant to complete specific tasks / modules, and have that information available to MLAs and their supervisors, so they can agree on realistic customized onboarding program priorities and expected progress.

In addition, while some specific information about processes and people could be communicated and absorbed quickly and early on during an onboarding program, it may take a considerably longer time to develop or improve leadership and management skills that research identifies many new MLAs as lacking. Availability of mentors, peer buddies, and informal support groups could help the new MLAs master application management and leadership topics of an onboarding program in the college setting.

Lastly it was clear to the author that all PPPs would like to have an online onboarding program as it was convenient, they understood the student experience more at the college (as students use the same delivery program), and they could easily access the information for later. The participants resoundingly shared that if given a choice of no onboarding program or an online onboarding program, they would choose the online program.

Through this process the types of topics that worked well with an online format were well-focused, very narrow topics with a couple of HTML pages, videos, or short PowerPoint presentations (e.g. college culture and policies, and networking). Broader topics (e.g. leadership and management) do not work well in an online format so they should be explored with MLAs supervisor for possible in-person trainings as an add needed basis. If time or money do not permit this type of training the supervisor and the MLA can peruse topics on TED Talks and YouTube for appropriate material.

### **Generalizability**

The intent of the vast majority of qualitative research studies is to study a specific phenomenon in a certain population. Consequently, one does not typically anticipate generalizability as an attribute of qualitative research findings (Merriam, 2009). The limited generalizability of qualitative data means further extending the applicability of findings requires extending research into a more general population. For the findings of this study, this would require implementing onboarding programs at other campuses or conducting repeated tests at OCC as more new MLAs are hired.

A pragmatic approach to assessing generalizability for qualitative studies is to adopt congruent criteria and techniques for consistency and validity across all studies use of sampling, triangulation, and proper audit documentation. However, some researchers espouse the approach of analytical generalization where one examines and reviews the extent to which the findings in one study in an effort to generalize them to fit another study with a similar theoretical model. These generalizations can result from comparing similarities between the time, place, people and other social contexts (Leung, 2015).

Researching the experiences of other onboarding process participants is necessary to obtain a comprehensive view of the process. Since the author implemented this program in a Canvas classroom, this study can easily be replicated with the basic program at another college campus by simply migrating the underlying files from the OCC Canvas installation to that of the new hosting site. One would need to tailor campus-specific material, such as president's welcome, as well as the mandatory training and organizational charts, to reflect the new site, but this would be a relatively simple undertaking. Additionally, in order to promote consistency, central organizations such as SBCTC could control those modules that cover topics common to

all campuses (e.g., state reporting requirements). Once in place, all sites could link to these centrally-located modules.

The study results may vary as the sample sizes increase from having more of the thirty-four community and technical colleges within the SBCTC participate in the program. Likewise, one would anticipate that increasing the number of modules and refining the presentations would also have an effect on study results. Finally, if one can aggregate results across campuses, one could begin applying meaningful statistical analyses to aid in generalizations.

### **Limitations**

There were four acknowledged limitations to this study:

First, the study focused on one community college campus. The SBCTC system consists of thirty-four community and technical colleges. The study results may limit the generalization to other community and technical colleges throughout Washington State, as well as other states and settings. Since the onboarding program was developed to meet the culture of the campus and each college and campus has its own culture, this limitation needs to be acknowledged. On the other hand, the college controls hiring practices across the entire SBCTC system and each college is hiring from within the same general population. Consequently, one may reasonably assume that new MLAs throughout the campuses are going to have, in general, the same level of management experience and the same need to understand the culture of their campus. Thus, while a campus-specific program will necessarily need to be developed by the hosting college; more general modules (e.g., project management or race relations) may be shared across campuses or even states.

Second, the sample size was limited because the study was constrained to one campus during one year. A test pool size of four online onboarding participants is far below the

threshold for invoking the Central Limit Theorem and consequently, one may not assume the results are statistically normal, much less representative of the MLA population at large. Thus, the confidence interval for any given set of responses is very high if one wishes a confidence level of at least 95%. For instance, if one assumes a population of 100 MLAs throughout the system, a sample of four yields a confidence interval of 47. Consequently, statistical analysis may not be representative of the entire population of the state's MLAs. However, since this study was based on qualitative research and seeking out emergent themes, it relied less on statistical results and more on thematic discoveries that spanned not only the test population, but the perspectives of the focus group members.

Third, due to constraints on time and other resources, the author needed to use some material that others had already developed for live presentations. As a result, some module segments in the pilot program were not optimal for online delivery. For example, the author knew in advance that a 112-slide PowerPoint presentation would be problematic for her audience. Also, Canvas, the delivery system for the program, handles files such as those produced by Word, PowerPoint, and PDF differently than it does HTML pages. Consequently, some module segments behaved differently than others and this was a known disruptor. However, these issues were recognized and deemed acceptable due to the fact that the pilot program was a prototype and not intended to be a finished product. Participant feedback confirmed these are detractors and underscored the importance of having a finished, interactive, and consistent presentation.

Lastly, the researcher designed the pilot program as a case study and confined its scope to three modules, two of which were campus-specific and one which covered a more general topic, and participants were instructed to go through all three modules. A participant with leadership

and management experience would be inclined to rate this third module as less useful, thus skewing the study results. As outlined by the author, this would not happen in practice, since MLAs and their supervisors could omit this module while tailoring the MLA's onboarding program to their specific needs.

### **Conclusions**

Onboarding new MLAs is needed, but the modules need to contain the correct information for the program to be effectively used. The goal of the study is to provide evidence of this phenomenon with a possible solution that is both cost effective to implement, as well as time conscious to participants. This study contributed to the growing knowledge bases related to the factors that are needed to better prepare MLAs for their first year at a community college.

### **Recommendations**

Exploratory qualitative studies are not meant or constructed to provide data for generalization to larger populations. Qualitative studies do provide information to enhance certain activities or problems. These types of studies are seldom definitive, but instead provide an understanding of the people researched (Babbie, 2001). The data from this research showed that an onboarding program could assist in having MLAs feel more effective within their positions sooner. The effectiveness extended to better understanding of the campus culture, as well as the organization structure as a whole. The onboarding activities associated with giving the new MLAs an initial understanding of the organization's culture were extremely beneficial. The onboarding program revealed that some participants did not enjoy the leadership and management section, a recommendation would be for the right mix of material be added to this section or participants find workshops to attend that would meet their individual needs.

The following recommendations are made for further study based on the results and conclusions regarding onboarding MLAs. A replication of this study of MLAs should be conducted using another college campus. This replication of the study would broaden the sampling pool and give verification to the various perceptions of what is needed in a successful onboarding program.

OCC could make the following improvements based on the observations and feedback from this study:

1. Smaller is better than larger. Instead of 112 slide presentation about leadership, break it into 15 - 20 slide segments. Massive presentations promise drudgery, bypassing, and dread. This means that people will not acquire the needed knowledge. Utilizing technology programs like Camtasia (n.d.) would also allow the participant to hear, as well as read the information.
2. Make surveys/assessments interactive. Trait studies could be set up as an HTML form, and with JavaScript or backend PHP code, a click of a button would score the answers and provide the analysis. This enables participants to have Skinner's immediate feedback. A collateral benefit of interactive forms is that one may design them to provide information to a database in the background. By stripping off all identifying markers (participant name, for instance) and recording their assessment results or responses, one could establish a baseline for future case studies, profiles for MLAs, or even implement a feature such as "Here's what other people said" in response to the videos. Thus, participants' reactions would be preserved for consideration by future participants.

3. Use videos of situations to model different scenarios. Then have an interactive form where the participant can write their reactions, how they would handle the situation, etc. Afterwards, the participant can share this with their supervisor or a discussion group (as appropriate). For example, a situational video could be reviewed on YouTube and have a conversation around "who is right and why?" or "How would you handle this situation?". If the college has a videographer, interactive scenarios can be created that are college specific in content. This would also acknowledge the importance of Knowles' adult theory.
4. Create a sustainable mentoring system for new MLAs, where the mentors are in a different division than the new MLA. This will provide a safe sounding board, as well as direction.
5. Work on the culture of distrust and dishonesty that is inherent based on the comments of the HLAs and MLAs. This could be a far deeper rooted problem that onboarding will not be able to correct, as the underlying concern is fear of losing you position. MLAs may feel that the expectations from the HLAs are so implicit that they may not be able to attain them. OCC can shift the culture by naming what is needed from the MLAs and allow the MLAs latitude to learn the required skill. The idea of "faking it until you make it" is neither beneficial nor useful for new MLAs.

As Kluckhohn (1949) said, "Culture is a way of thinking, feeling, believing" (p. 23). This specific way of thinking, feeling, and believing is what companies want to instill in their employees". The initial onboarding program begins the learning experience, but the MLAs must complete the process. There is an acute disconnection of expectations between HLAs and what MLAs feel is expected of them that demonstrate a need to augment the onboarding

classroom to include project management. The MLA's experiences show a need for strengthening a knowledge base around budgeting, which was a theme that echoed throughout the MLA focus group. The question then becomes how to further augment the onboarding program to be more robust, without becoming so bloated that it is overwhelming for a MLA. Many believe the answer lies in a just-in-time model approach, where MLAs can reference material when needed after the first onboarding occurs.

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## Appendix A: Focus group questions for MLA participants

Good afternoon and thank you for being a part of my focus group today. The purpose of this study is to identify components and attributes of a successful mid-level administrator onboarding process at a community college. I will be recording this session today, but all information will be kept confidential. The recordings will be destroyed by June 30, 2016. The goal of my research is to help mid-level administrators acclimate to their roles sooner. Today I have 11 questions that I would like to ask the group and I would like everyone to speak. There is no set order as to who speaks when; the idea is that I will ask a question and everybody will have a chance to respond. Your participation is crucial to the success of this project, so please, don't hesitate to speak up. Since this is being recorded please do not speak over one another. Do you have any questions before we start?

1. How long you have been in your current role? If you can recall your experience here as a new employee, please describe it.

2. Did anyone at OCC orient you in the first few months of your employment?

**If yes**, what were some of the things they did to orient you to your job and the school. Of all the things they did, which were the most effective and why?

**If no**, how did you learn about the way things are supposed to be done?

3. How did you know what was expected of you and that you were meeting those expectations?

4. What obstacles, if any, did you face early on and how did you overcome them?

5. Of the knowledge, skills, and abilities you required for success in your position, which ones did you already have and which ones did you lack?

6. What do you remember as the hardest and best things about being 'new' at OCC?

7. To whom did you turn when you needed help with a problem during your first few months here?

8. When were you no longer 'new'? How did you know?

9. When thinking about new employees, do you feel their first few months here are harder, easier, or about the same as when you were a new employee? Why?

10. What would have been important for you to know about the college when you were a new employee?

11. What ideas could you offer the college to help new employees feel more accepted into the organization?

## Appendix B: Electronic module surveys for onboarding participants

Using a 4-point Likert scale: Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Agree and Strongly Agree

### **Module 1- Culture and Training:**

My onboarding experience helped me to:

1. Understand the culture of my community college
2. Align my performance goals with those of the college and college leadership
3. Learn how to accomplish tasks at OCC.
4. Having the onboarding program online was convenient for me.

### **Module 2- Networking:**

My onboarding experience helped me to:

5. Build relationships I need to effectively perform in my role.
6. Understand the college's organizational structure and how my role relates to other roles within the college.
7. Realize that if giving a choice of having an online onboarding program or no onboarding program at all, I would prefer to have the online onboarding program.

### **Module 3- Leadership & Management:**

My onboarding experience helped me to:

8. Match my leadership strategy with the current environment in my department/division
9. Build a leadership team within my department/division.
10. Receive timely feedback from my direct reports through soliciting the feedback and encouraging open dialogue.
11. Receive timely feedback from the person to whom I report to through soliciting their feedback.

## Appendix C: Focus group questions for HLA participants

## Key questions:

What do you feel are the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) needed to be a successful mid-level administrator at the college and why?

Which of the aforementioned KSAs, do you see your mid-level administrators exhibit on a regular basis?

What training and development do you think will provide MLAs with the KSAs you do not see regularly exhibited?

What challenges, if any, did you see MLAs facing within their first year here and how do you foresee overcoming them?

Ending: If you had a chance to give advice to someone who is studying the most effective way to bring a new employee into this institution, what would you offer that has not been offered already?

## Appendix D: Module survey responses for pilot program participants

**Module 1- Culture & Training:**

My onboarding experience will help me:

Understand the culture of my community college.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (1 participant selected this option)
- Agree (2 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree (1 participant selected this option)

Align my performance goals with those of the college and college leadership.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree (2 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree (2 participants selected this option)

Learn how to accomplish tasks at OCC.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree (2 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree (2 participants selected this option)

Having the onboarding program online was convenient for me?

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree (4 participants selected this option)

**Module 2- Networking:**

My onboarding experience will help me:

Build relationships I need to effectively perform in my role.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (1 participant selected this option)
- Agree
- Strongly Agree (3 participants selected this option)

Understand the college's organizational structure and how my role relates to other roles within the college.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree (3 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree (1 participant selected this option)

Realize that if giving a choice of having an online onboarding program or no onboarding program at all, I would prefer to have the online onboarding program.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree
- Agree
- Strongly Agree (4 participants selected this option)

**Module 3-Leadership & Management:**

My onboarding experience will help me:

Match my leadership strategy with the current environment in my department/division.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (1 participant selected this option)
- Agree (3 participants selected this option)

- Strongly Agree

Build a leadership team within my department/division.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (2 participants selected this option)
- Agree (1 participant selected this option)
- Strongly Agree (1 participant selected this option)

Receive timely feedback from my direct reports through soliciting the feedback and encouraging open dialogue.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (2 participants selected this option)
- Agree (2 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree

Receive timely feedback from the person I report to through soliciting their feedback.

- Strongly Disagree
- Disagree (2 participants selected this option)
- Agree (2 participants selected this option)
- Strongly Agree

## Appendix E: Questionnaire responses

**1. Has participating in an onboarding process helped you feel more effective at your job?**

**If yes, please provide some examples of how the process has helped you. If no, please share why you believe this process has not been helpful to you.**

## Participant A

I think this will provide a lot of great tools for me in my position! The best example is that I have two off-campus coaches who I know feel somewhat disconnected from the campus community. This process has given me an outline and approach I can use to help them gain more institutional knowledge to help them to better direct their athletes when they face a question versus just directing them to me.

## Participant B

It was helpful. It provided some basic information and tools as well as great self-assessment/leadership assessment tools and great employee related info that was particularly helpful to me. I have a large and diverse set of employees.

## Participant C

Mostly yes ("Agree" on the Likert scale). Placing all of the relevant information online that can be accessed on my own was helpful as well as many of the attached documents and links. The only aspect that I did not believe was helpful were the leadership checklists/handouts, especially the ones for creating a dialogue with your direct reports. It did not allow for differing managerial styles or allow flexibility in allowable work styles. For example, the "High-Mid-Low" description on Characteristics for employee expectations was too rigid and required "High" to include both being on time as well as frequently coming in early or staying late. Being on time and using your time

wisely (i.e. efficiently and effectively) is more important to me as a manager than coming in early or staying late.

#### Participant D

I went through this process a year after I started. I believe the elements that were focused on an introduction to the college would be helpful. Those items focused on leadership and how to interact with staff felt somewhat insulting. I believe I was hired because I have those skills and know how to navigate staff issues and be an effective leader.

### **2. How has your onboarding experience been to date? Is anything missing, if so please share what you would like to see?**

#### Participant A

Besides what I've already outlined in previous feedback I think a timeline of major expectations - from S & A Budget Timeline, Developing Goals for next academic year to registration and financial aid deadlines.

Obviously these are specific to MY position but I think are VERY valuable pieces that would help (or could have helped) me preform my job better.

#### Participant B

I think it has gone well, but I came to the college with system and college knowledge. I am very thankful for peers that reached out to me very early on.

#### Participant C

Overall, this was very solid.

#### Participant D

My original onboarding experience was missing many of the elements this provided. I believe this would have been helpful to intergration into this job.

**3. What has been most valuable to you during your onboarding?**

## Participant A

I think the culture and training piece was the best - it reassured me of my approach to my position but also gave me some ideas for what I need to do for my coaches/staff to pass that same message along.

## Participant B

Information related to dealing with employees and how to impact performance was very helpful - the HML info. Understanding college culture is also very important.

## Participant C

Being able to do this on my own time as well as having very strong feel for the culture of the college.

## Participant D

Face-to-face introductions to staff is always the most important piece. Even if you don't remember names, becoming familiar with the staff across campus is vital.

**4. What was the least valuable to you during your onboarding?**

## Participant A

Module 3 I would say was the least interesting to me - I think that it had SOME good points, however I think that topic is too generic to try and cover in the blanket manner it was. However I do recognize that the content could be better crafted if fully implemented to better fit the specific department perhaps with institutional knowledge about who's already there so you know who you're working with.

## Participant B

Since I come from a system/college background, a few of the basic items such as the Ethics test, etc. were familiar to me. But I also feel that refreshers are good.

Participant C

The documents to help manage direct reports. They felt too restrictive as they did not allow for different leadership styles.

Participant D

I think the elements focused on trying to develop leadership skills is a reach in this forum.

**5. Are you performing tasks that require a skill you would like to develop better?**

**Yes or No, if yes, please describe the nature of a training opportunity that you think you be helpful.**

Participant A

Yes - I would like to be better trained on the Financial Aid and Advising systems within reason for my position to better be able to answer athlete's questions versus having to direct them to other people and not necessarily fully understanding or comprehending what the actual solution was.

Participant B

Yes - with capital projects, I would like to have more technical knowledge - HVAC in particular.

Participant C

No.

Participant D

no

**6. Is there any specific information that you would like to receive in the onboarding process that currently is not readily available to you? Yes or No, If yes, please share what type of**

**information you need.**

Participant A

Not that I haven't outlined in previous feedback...

Participant B

I think this is very thorough. It is helpful to include purchasing, hiring, etc. info. Those things can easily be overlooked in onboarding.

Participant C

Yes. Budget training from a 30,000 foot level as it pertains to OCC. Each college has different philosophies and systems for developing, tracking and maintaining budgets.

This is very crucial to me as an administrator overseeing multiple budgets.

Participant D

Again, hard to remember from a year ago.

**7. What recommendations do you have for the next leader we onboard and why?**

Participant A

Fully utilize this process - it will help you to understand the institution your stepping foot in and can help you succeed as well as avoid potential issues.

Participant B

I think those who are not new and those of us who are "sort of" new should make efforts to reach out and connect with them. That was probably the greatest gift I had when I started here.

Participant C

Listen to your direct reports, do a strengths analysis of your staff (can be informal), and praise them for what they do well. This will help you to develop rapport, support staff growth and maximize productivity.

Participant D

Focus on understanding the college, processes, and the people who work here before diving into the details of the job. Knowing that information will give a much better understanding of the details.

**8. Please list any other thoughts or comments you might have about the onboarding process.**

Participant A

One thought that did come to me is talking about how your position could interact with Facilities and IT and what services those departments offer - I think that was one of the longest learning curves was what did/didn't need coordination with those departments and WHAT exactly those departments could offer me to help me do my job better.

Participant B

I believe it can be done in some pieces over some time so the person can take it all in. It is great to have time with a supervisor to understand their preferences and to also have the time with employees to get to know them. I jumped right in and it took a while to really get to know both staff and my supervisor.

Participant C

None at this time.

Participant D

Overall a structured process like this for onboarding would be valuable to new staff.

## Appendix F: Optional Module Feedback

**Feedback for Module 1 - Culture & Training (optional for participants):**

## Participant A

Personally I love this module and think it would have served me well over my start at OCC and could have avoided several "issues" when I first started.

It also raised some questions for me as to WHAT training exactly my current staff has had on some of the same issues.

## Participant B

Even though I have worked at the college for over six months and have been in the CTC system for many years, I gained a lot from this first module. The purchasing documents provide clear guidance and I believe they would be very helpful for a new state employee. I enjoyed the message from Dr. Stokes and think for a new employee it would be helpful in understanding culture. I hope to use some of these tools with my direct reports also. Thank you!

**Feedback for Module 2 - Networking (optional for participants):**

## Participant A

Again...a great module...I liked the outline and guidance for how to network on campus. We all consider ourselves (I think) to have SOME talent at networking, but this frames it in a functional format as it applies to our job.

This would have been especially helpful to me when I began as when I had questions about things (for example financial aid) and wasn't informed enough to direct my student athletes in the right direction immediately but instead had to do research. Having those org charts right off the bat I'm positive I would have had them on file in my office - which I'm actually now going to do!

The only thing that I would add to this would be (in assuming this was to be actively implemented on a campus) to have those initial people that you need to connect with (& why) provided to the new employee so they've been given a jump start in the process.

#### Participant B

I was very fortunate to have several individuals reach out to me soon after I started at OCC and they have become great mentors and have been helpful in sharing about the college culture, resources on history of projects, etc. I really appreciate having those individuals to connect with. I plan to be more eliberate about reaching out to some new individuals that I might not typically cross paths with to further those connections. One of the great benefits of working on capital projects is that you work closely with user groups and can form relationships that way too. Thank you - helpful tools!

#### **Feedback for Module 3 – Leadership & Management (optional for participants):**

#### Participant A

I really liked how some of the parts of this module were set up and found some others not as good.

I liked the leadership characteristics activity - however it would have been easier to had it be more interactive in some manner, maybe an online version of it or something similar. Not that there was anything wrong with that approach - I just think that to get the most out of it ideally it would be good to ensure that the approach allows for the minimum amount of error to ensure proper results as possible.

The 112 slides I honestly didn't sit and flip through - if there was a way to condense that I think it would be much better received - maybe a video? When I opened up that portion and saw the 112 slides I immediately thought to myself "I don't have time for this."

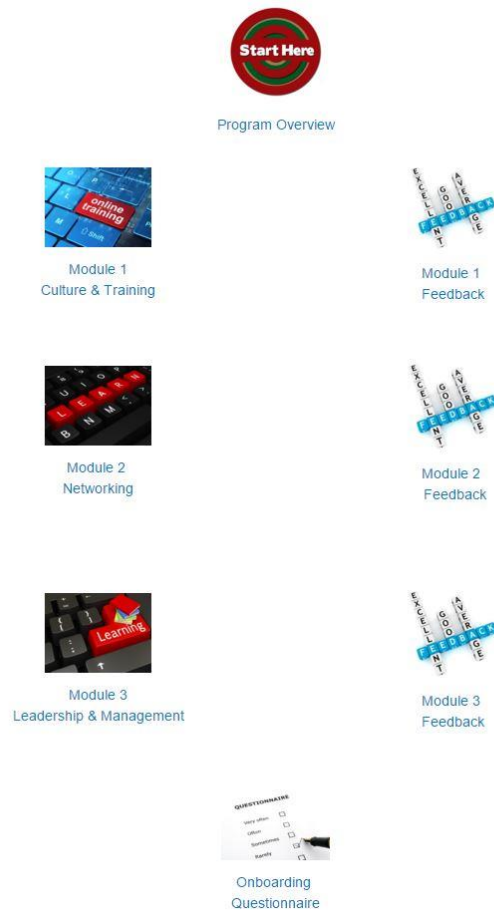
The hiring checklist seemed a little out of place - I can see why it was included in this piece however didn't make sense to me on first thought. Maybe a clearer transition of some type between identifying your style and translating that to your leadership position.

**Participant B**

Hello - This was all very helpful. I plan to discuss the HML concepts with my Direct Reports and walk through some employee assessments using the tool. Good self-evaluation tools also. Thanks -

## Appendix G: Onboarding Module Content

Home page screen shot:



Landing page content for each module:

### **Module 1 - Culture & Training**

In this module, you will begin your onboarding process with an overview of OCC, the college's culture and expectations, and how to get started in your role. Part of this process involves mandatory training, which is marked "Required". Please be sure to follow the steps outlined in these lessons.

To go to a specific page, simply click on its link below. Also, you will find two buttons marked "Previous" and "Next" at the bottom of each page. These will allow you to

traverse the pages in order without having to come back to this page for routine navigation.

### Dr. Stokes' Welcome

In this short video, President Stokes welcomes you on board and introduces you to the OCC campus and culture.

### Orientation Plan

You and your supervisor should develop a thorough orientation plan for you to follow. Here is a sample plan you can use as a starting point.

### OCC Vision, Mission, and Core Themes

These form the ethos of our culture. By understanding the college's vision, mission, and core themes, you will understand a great deal about your new environment.

### OCC's Values

Along with the college's vision, mission, and core themes, you should also be familiar with our key values.

### New Employee Orientation - Required

This is the first of our mandatory segments and is the basic new employee orientation process.

### Ethics Training - Required

Our positions require the utmost in ethical behavior. This mandatory segment discusses what that means to us.

### Sexual Harassment Training - Required

To achieve our utmost, we must provide everyone with a safe workplace. We do not condone sexual harassment of any kind. This required segment explains why.

### FERPA Training (Links to an external site.) - Required

Please be sure you understand the FERPA policy and provide HR with your signed form.

### The Foundation for Success

Learn the three pillars that form the foundation for your success here at OCC.

### Negotiating Success

A quick guide to successful negotiations and conversations.

### Culture

A short field guide for your exploration of our culture.

### How to purchase items at OCC

At some point, you *will* need to buy something for your office. Here is our requisitioning process.

### Outcome Survey for Module 1

Congratulations - you've made it through your first module! Please provide us with feedback about your experience so we can make it better for your successors.

## **Module 2 - Networking**

John Donne wrote, "No man is an island." Yet here you are in a sea of unknown organizations and relationships! This module will provide you with a map with which to navigate our college's many organizational structures.

### Creating Your Network

It's important to have a network of knowledgeable people you know and can go to for information and insights when you need them. Here's how to do it.

### Networking Worksheet

Filling in this worksheet will help you identify your network and spot holes that you

might need to fill.

### College Organizational Charts

Here are the organization charts for the various branches and offices on our campus.

### Instructional Division Organizational Charts

These charts will allow you to drill down into the instructional division's organizations.

### Outcome Survey for Module 2

Please provide your comments about this module.

## **Module 3 - Leadership & Management**

In your new role, you will be called upon to be both a manager and a leader - and there *is* a difference between the two. This module will help you start your new role.

### Leadership Orientation Instrument

A short survey that will allow you to assess your leadership style.

### Leadership Orientation Instrument - Scoring

Now that you have taken the survey, what does it mean? Here is how to interpret your results.

### Creating Department Goals

To keep your department from drifting, you need goals to steer towards. Here is a guide to creating them.

### Creating an Exceptional Work Environment

To attract and keep exceptional workers, you need an exceptional environment. Note that this is a 112-slide presentation; you will need to budget some time and coffee for this segment!

### Conversation Samples - HML Performers

A set of templates to guide conversations for different scenarios. These are not scripts, but will provide guidance on how to shape the conversation in advance.

#### Differentiating Leadership Worksheet

This is a matrix that will allow you to assess your attribute levels of leadership. It can also help you assess others and identify areas where you may be able to help your subordinates *and* superiors advance.

#### Differentiating Staff Worksheet

As a manager and a leader, your role requires you to assess your staff members. This matrix is similar to the Leadership Matrix in the previous segment, but is oriented towards assessing a subordinate's attributes.

#### Employee Tracking Log - Sample

This is a form that you can download and use when counselling employees. You may be able to use it to organize what attributes you want to cover as well as specific suggestions for improvement.

#### Hiring Checklist - Adjunct Faculty

When you are hiring a new staff member, there are a lot of details to keep track of. This checklist will help you assure your new hire has a smooth arrival when they get here.

#### Electronic Survey for Your Direct Reports

To be a good leader, you need good followers. And those followers probably see you differently than you see yourself. This short survey will allow your followers to rate your performance as a manager and a leader; it can give you valuable insights that you otherwise would not have.

#### Outcome Survey for Module 3

Please provide your feedback for Module 3.

## Appendix H: Participant Demographics

Table 3

*The Demographic Make-up of the Onboarding Participants & Focus Groups*

	Female	Male	Age Group				Division					
			30-39	40-49	50-59	60-69	Student Services	Administrative Services	Instruction	Human Resources	Information Technology	College Relations
Onboarding Participants												
	1	3	2	1	1	-	2	1	1	-	-	-
HLA Focus Group												
	2	1	-	-	1	2	-	-	-	1	1	0
MLA Focus Group (combined)												
	8	1	5	2	1	1	4	-	4	-	-	1
MLA Focus Group 1												
	5	1	3	1	1	1	2	-	3	-	-	1
MLA Focus Group 2												
	3	-	2	1	-	-	2	-	1	-	-	-

Appendix I: HLA Consent Form  
**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**  
**ONLINE ONBOARDING OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE MID-LEVEL  
ADMINISTRATORS CONSENT FORM**

**HLA Focus Group**

Researchers: Heather F. Lukashin 360-870-0909

Dr. Ginger MacDonald, faculty advisor 253-692-5690

**Researchers' statement**

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to identify components and attributes of a successful onboarding process at a community college for mid-level administrators (MLAs). MLAs fill a pivotal role within an institution – they are the linchpin connecting Vice Presidents and Presidents (High Level Administrators or HLAs) with classified staff and students. As HLAs select new goals and directions for the institution, MLAs must develop implementation plans and direct the efforts of the staff. If the classified staff encounters challenges, the MLAs must either develop and coordinate a remediation plan or communicate the problem to the appropriate HLA.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**What will I be expected to do if I participate?**

The purpose of the focus group you would be participating in, if you choose to, would be to ask you questions regarding mid-level administrators' knowledge, skills, and abilities. The feedback from the focus group that you would be a part of would be incorporated into the onboarding program for new mid-level administrators.

**How much time will this take and will it be during work hours?**

The focus group will meet once to gather opinions on what high-level administrators perceive is needed for new mid-level administrators to be successful in their roles. I anticipate that the time commitment would be 1.5–3 hours.

**Will I be recorded in any way?**



## Appendix J: MLA Consent Form

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON  
ONLINE ONBOARDING OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE MID-LEVEL  
ADMINISTRATORS CONSENT FORM  
MLA Focus Group**

Researchers: Heather F. Lukashin 360-870-0909

Dr. Ginger MacDonald, faculty advisor 253-692-5690

**Researchers' statement**

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**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to identify components and attributes of a successful onboarding process at a community college for mid-level administrators (MLAs). MLAs fill a pivotal role within an institution – they are the linchpin connecting Vice Presidents and Presidents (High Level Administrators or HLAs) with classified staff and students. As HLAs select new goals and directions for the institution, MLAs must develop implementation plans and direct the efforts of the staff. If the classified staff encounters challenges, the MLAs must either develop and coordinate a remediation plan or communicate the problem to the appropriate HLA.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS****What will I be expected to do if I participate?**

The focus group you would be participating in, if you choose to, would be to ask you approximately 23 questions regarding knowledge and training you believe would have been valuable to you when starting your career as a mid-level administrator. The feedback from the focus group that you would be a part of would be incorporated into the onboarding program for new mid-level administrators.

**How much time will this take and will it be during work hours?**

The focus group will meet once or twice during the work day to gather opinions regarding the onboarding program. The anticipated time commitment would be approximately 1.5–3 hours. Please note that the anticipated time, if two meetings are required, will be no more than 3 hours.

**Will I be recorded in any way?**

The focus group will be audio recorded. All information will be kept confidential, which means your name and identities need to be retained. Since the information is confidential, I will assign a number to your responses, and there will be a key created to indicate which number belongs to which participant. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will not reveal details about where you work, where you live, any personal information about you, and so forth. The audio recordings and the key between the data and the identifiers are expected to be destroyed by June 2016. The information is confidential so it will not impact your employability or reputation. Government or university staff sometimes reviews studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

### **What are the benefits of participating?**

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand how to make a Director or Dean more effective sooner. This information should help us to build a comprehensive onboarding program for mid-level administrators in a community college setting. Please note that you might not experience individual benefit(s) from participating.

### **What are the risks in participating?**

The risks to you for participating in this study would be consistent with any that arise in work place collaborations. Great care will be used when coding your information, but you may feel a risk if you share that you or your mid-level administrators were not fully prepared to lead your office or division. You also may feel a risk to your reputation. There will be no risk that will place you at risk of civil or criminal liability, or will it be damaging to your financial standing. Since participating in this study is completely voluntary, you have the right to decline to be in the study in the first place. If, at any time you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

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Printed name of researcher      Signature of researcher      Date

### **Subject's statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed name of participant      Signature of participant      Date

Copies to:      Researcher / Subject

Appendix K: MLA Participant Consent Form  
**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**  
**ONLINE ONBOARDING OF COMMUNITY COLLEGE MID-LEVEL  
ADMINISTRATORS CONSENT FORM**  
**ONBOARDING MLA PARTICIPANT**

Researchers: Heather F. Lukashin 360-870-0909

Dr. Ginger MacDonald, faculty advisor 253-692-5690

**Researchers' statement**

We are asking you to be in a research study. The purpose of this consent form is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the form carefully. You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not. This process is called "informed consent." We will give you a copy of this form for your records.

**PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The purpose of this study is to identify components and attributes of a successful onboarding process at a community college for mid-level administrators (MLAs). MLAs fill a pivotal role within an institution – they are the linchpin connecting Vice Presidents and Presidents (High Level Administrators or HLAs) with classified staff and students. As HLAs select new goals and directions for the institution, MLAs must develop implementation plans and direct the efforts of the staff. If the classified staff encounters challenges, the MLAs must either develop and coordinate a remediation plan or communicate the problem to the appropriate HLA.

**QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS**

**What will I be expected to do if I participate?**

The onboarding program is designed to be interwoven with the daily tasks you complete in your position. This onboarding program is designed to help you familiarize yourself with the college, give you strategies for management, assist you in filling out paperwork, and introduce you to key individuals at the college that can assist you in your position. There are a total of 3 modules in the onboarding program. At the end of each module, there will be a short face-to-face interview with me expected to last about ½ hour. You will also complete self-assessment surveys, as well as program surveys. The surveys are short and will take approximately 5 to 15 minutes of your time.

**How much time will this take and will it be during work hours?**

The duration of the study is 3 months; and I do not anticipate that the overall time commitment will exceed a total of 7 hours. The onboarding program, interviews, and surveys are designed to

be done during your regular work hours. However, I understand that you may wish to do some aspects of the program outside of work hours, which is fine. The face-to-face interviews, as well as some exercises of the on-boarding program will be conducted during your work hours. The surveys and the majority of exercises of the onboarding program can be done during or outside of work hours online; and when you actually complete them will be left to your discretion.

**Will I be recorded in any way?**

Your face-to-face interviews will be audio recorded. All information will be kept confidential, which means your name and identities need to be retained. Since the information is confidential, I will assign a number to your responses, and there will be a key created to indicate which number belongs to which participant. In any articles I write or any presentations that I make, I will not reveal details about where you work, where you live, any personal information about you, and so forth. The audio recordings and the key between the data and the identifiers are expected to be destroyed by June 2016. Since the information is confidential so it will not impact your employability or reputation. Government or university staff sometimes reviews studies such as this one to make sure they are being done safely and legally. If a review of this study takes place, your records may be examined. The reviewers will protect your privacy. The study records will not be used to put you at legal risk of harm.

**What are the benefits of participating?**

The benefit of this research is that you will be helping us to understand how to make a Director or Dean more effective sooner. This information should help us to build a comprehensive onboarding program for mid-level administrators in a community college setting. Please note that you might not experience individual benefit(s) from participating.

**What are the risks in participating?**

The risks to you for participating in this study would be consistent with any that arise in work place collaborations. Great care will be used when coding your information, but you may feel a risk if you share that you or your mid-level administrators were not fully prepared to lead your office or division. You also may feel a risk to your reputation. There will be no risk that will place you at risk of civil or criminal liability, or will it be damaging to your financial standing. Since participating in this study is completely voluntary, you have the right to decline to be in the study in the first place. If, at any time you do not wish to continue, you have the right to withdraw from the study, without penalty, at any time.

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Printed name of researcher      Signature of researcher      Date

**Subject's statement**

This study has been explained to me. I volunteer to take part in this research. I have had a chance to ask questions. If I have questions later about the research, or if I have been harmed by participating in this study, I can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this consent form. If I have questions about my rights as a research subject, I can call the Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. I will receive a copy of this consent form.

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Printed name of participant

Signature of participant

Date

Copies to:     Researcher / Subject

## Appendix L: MLA Onboarding Coding Manual

<b>Code</b>	<b>Description</b>
Emotional intelligence, management and leadership skills	<p>Emotional intelligence broadly describes "people skills", including congeniality, collaboration and networking skills, as well as conflict resolution.</p> <p>Management skills include specific categories of project management, change management (and continuous improvement), managing a diverse team.</p> <p>Leadership skills included ability to deal with high workloads, encouraging and motivating people, providing feedback, soliciting feedback, knowing how to say no without "crushing", and educating on ways to do things better.</p>
Information Asymmetry	<p>A situation where one party to a transaction has more or better relevant information than the other party. In this study, HLAs noted they lack information about objective competencies of MLA candidates in management or leadership skills, during the hiring proces; while MLAs reflected on the need to "fake it until you make it". In addition, MLAs might not be able to accurately assess their own management/leadership skills, especially if those competencies are weak; plus, there may not be a way</p>

	for MLAs competent in the relevant areas to credibly signal their competence.
Lack of clarity (expectations/processes)	This theme captures both lack of clarity regarding expectations about job duties of a new MLA, and lack of clarity about specific processes at the institution (also "history" or "how it works"), including lack of (updated and readily available) documentation as to procedures to follow and people to involve to accomplish specific tasks like budgeting or hiring.
Mentors, peer buddies, informal support groups	Both HLAs and MLAs mentioned importance of mentors, peer learning, and informal support groups that would incorporate an opportunity to ask questions and allow for sharing experiences. MLAs also mentioned importance of receiving informal "pothold warnings", and voiced a strong desire for a mentor not to be a co-worker, supervisor, or direct report - rather, someone from a different part of campus; the same applied to a buddy program and specific community-centered groups - so that honest, "real" conversations could be had. A culture shift that would encourage everyone to find peers / groups / support on campus was also mentioned.

<p>Reliance on staff / networking</p>	<p>This theme reflects two common ways discussed by MLA focus groups regarding how they overcame the lack of clarity (theme) - either by relying on their subordinates (who were often there for a long time when the MLA came onboard) or superiors, or by actively reaching out (networking) with peers at the college and at other institutions/organizations.</p> <p>External networks seemed particularly important if some of the MLA's job duties were not performed by anyone else at the college.</p>
<p>State of flux</p>	<p>Also referred to as "higher current uncertainty" or "dynamic shift", revealed mostly in MLA focus groups, and is likely unique to the research site and timing of the study, since there was a major college leadership change around the time focus groups' MLAs came onboard. The leadership change brought in uncertainty as to direction and processes, either existing or target state ones. This theme compounds the challenges with the lack of clarity regarding expectation/processes, and could potentially explain why lack of clarity theme was so pronounced in MLA feedback.</p>

Appendix M: QDA Image of MLA Onboarding Coding

CODE	Text	Code
1	Sort of a quick rush to glean as much knowledge as I could. She was at least generous. She had a lot of things written down well, and sort of information compiled for me to access if I had questions I didn't know about. She's continued to be accessible, but it was a pretty hairy process. It took a while before I feel like I had my feet under me and could even sort of stop and speak with the staff, and things like that effective.	Reliance on staff / networking
Participant 2	I've been in this position for eight years. Came on board after the previous dean departed and shredded and wiped his computer over a period of two days. I came into situation in which the admin assistant.... I've done division chair work before, so I wasn't unfamiliar with part of the work. Barbara, the admin assistant supported me, helped me understand how things were going. I mostly made it up.	Reliance on staff / networking Information Asymmetry
Participant 3	I've been in my position for a year and a month. Although in the middle of that my position changed and I got additional responsibilities. In that sense, it's been a little bit of grab and go. Learn a little bit, do a little bit, learn a lot, and still be able to manage the expectations there. Because it's the first time in our college where we've had this type of [inaudible 00:02:28], it's been challenging to try to learn all the different pockets where it effects. With limited guidance because nobody knows how it needs to be done, or how it should be done, or how it was done. I didn't have any of that historical knowledge that sometimes useful like you did in that sense. Just try to learn as I go and figure out if it's going to work or not, then reevaluate and do again.	Lack of clarity (expectations/processes)
Participant 3	I've been in the field for twenty-two years. I've been in the current role since August 1, 2011. When I started, I was kind of known because I actually came here previously before. I applied as a consultant. They decided when they hired me to come in and build and fly. There's a lot of [inaudible 00:03:23] that people kind of knew what I did and who I was, but it took a while to kind of blend in. It was kind of fake it until you make it. I had a lot of great people around me, and we just kind of filled in the blanks until it kind of took off. [inaudible 00:03:42]	Information Asymmetry Mentors, peer buddies, informal support group
Participant 1	I've been in my position, it will be two years this April. Position was empty for eight months before I got there, and program coordinator quit two days before I started. I kind of inherited some challenges to begin with. Again, I had my support. I had the [inaudible 00:04:10]. I had my administrative assistant who has been with the college I think seventeen years. Had a lot of that knowledge which was really helpful. Quickly made alliances through the state. People that were in similar positions is basically how I figured things out. A lot, a lot of conversations with a different people around the campus. My position I was in is pretty much like a lot of ours, where it's really specific in some senses that no one else really knows what it really does.	Reliance on staff / networking Lack of clarity (expectations/processes)