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The College of the Liberal Arts

CHALLENGE OF RETAINING TOP EMPLOYEES IN RURAL COMMUNITIES:
A CASE STUDY WITHIN THE ACADEMIC SECTOR

A Thesis in
Human Resources and Employment Relations

By
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this research is to bring together past literature and research and recent surveys to determine how turnover theories can be used for rural employers. Rural employers often find it difficult to recruit new employees, and in turn, find it even more difficult to retain employees. An example would be the health care industry that has brought some attention to this matter. A survey was conducted at a small rural higher education institution and this research focuses on the responses of the participants. It was found that, in the case of this sample, there was no correlation between job satisfaction and intent to remain with the organization. This contrasts the majority of literature on retention. In addition, it was shown that variables such as education level, gender, and marital status can help predict turnover for rural organizations’ employees.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

There has been a great shift in the power of the employee in the job market over the past few decades. Employees now control their destiny and move freely from one employer to the next (Cappelli, 1999). At one point, an employer may not have wanted to hire an employee who had several job changes, but this is now becoming normalized. Individuals are more concerned with advancing their career than maintaining the life-time employment that was once treasured. Initially this change was driven by employers, giving organizations added freedom over the hiring and termination employees and creating greater risk for workers (Cappelli, 1999). Employees found it necessary to adapt to these changes and began building individual capital by getting advanced degrees and going through special training, and as a result expected to be compensated fairly for these investments (Cappelli, 1999).

Employers who were once initiating change are now becoming frustrated with the results, in particular the amount of time and money that is invested into employee turnover. There have been several estimates as to the exact cost to the employer, but the price tag has ranged up to one year’s salary of the position for which the organization is hiring. One study estimates that over half of all job replacements cost over $10,000 (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Another fear is that employer provided training will be used as human capital and taken to another organization. Employers are now faced with a group of employees who want more from the employer then the life-time promise of employment. Many rural employers have expressed that their turnover rate and ability to attract qualified candidates is steadily worsening.
Rural employers are having trouble recruiting and maintaining qualified employees. One of the best examples of this issue is in the health care sector. There have been programs put in place to assist rural communities in finding qualified health care professionals to come to these remote areas (California HealthCare Foundation, 2000). The problem still remains that even when these health care professionals do come to rural towns, it is usually to gain experience and their professional plan is to not remain long term. These professionals will eventually move on to areas that have the most modern medical equipment and additional opportunities for growth. The health care profession is not the only sector plagued with turnover issues. Many rural organizations have been finding it difficult to keep their employees long term, causing increased cost to the employer.

The purpose of this research is to look at the issues surround employee turnover in rural communities, particularly in the academic sector. The academic sector is interesting because they produce college or university educated candidates who would have the capability of filling the vacant positions left by voluntary turnover. However, few of these educated individuals decide to take positions at their alma mater, and instead choose to return to their home towns or relocate to larger areas with more opportunity for growth. The purpose of this research is to identify what is causing turnover in one rural higher education institution through surveys, interviews, and statistical inferences.
Chapter 2

HR College Background

First, it must be noted that the name of the organization and location has been changed to protect the institutions anonymity. HR College is a small higher education institution that consists of approximately 500 employees. It is located in a rural community, which I will refer to as Mountain View. Mountain View has a population of less than 10,000 and has showed a slow decrease in population since 2000 (ruralcommunity.com). HR College is one of the predominant leading local employers. The average per capita personal income for the area is less than $25,000 per year, and the average household income is less than $35,000 per year. Unemployment rates for Mountain View have been increasing gradually and are currently 5.5%, which is relatively high compared with other counties in its state. Although the economy may not be booming in Mountain View, residents enjoy the relative safety of the area. In 2005, there were a total of 609 crimes reported for the entire county (ruralcommunity.com). There were three murders reported; the majority of reported crimes were thefts. Approximately 95% of the community is Caucasian. A large majority of the population is Christian; a small portion is Jewish and Islamic; and Hinduism and Buddhism are almost non-existent in this community.

The demographics of HR College and Mountain View are very similar. Of the approximately 500 employees at HR College, approximately 97% of them are Caucasian, and gender is split at almost exactly 50% male and 50% female. In Figure 2-1, below, there are some obvious trends in how gender is broken down by position. Men and women are equally likely to be hired for administrative positions; however, women are
more likely to hold office support positions, while men hold a higher percentage of faculty positions. The average employee age is 44 years old and the average income for HR College employees is approximately $45,500. The average income for HR College employees is significantly higher than the average per capita income of Mountain View residents. Despite this difference in income averages, several times throughout the study employees stated that they felt underpaid. Therefore, it was important to further analyze the data that was available. Figure 2-2 shows the average income based on job classification. This figure shows that office support employees’ income is similar to the expected income for Mountain View residents, administrative income is close to the average for HR College Employees, and faculty wages are more than twice the average wage of office support employees. In addition, Figure 2-3 shows the average income of employees based on age. As seen in this graph, there is very little difference in pay from the 30’s age range through the 50’s. Although one could speculate as to why the value remains consist, appropriate data was not available to find a conclusive reason for this occurrence.
Figure 2-1: Gender Percentage Based on Job Status

![Gender Percentage Chart]

Figure 2-2: Average Income of HR College Employees Based on Job Classification

![Average Income Chart]
Many employers are now beginning to put extra effort into retention of their employees. Advertising prices, training cost, and valuable time lost are key factors in wanting to reduce turnover. Presently, HR College does not have a retention policy, data on turnover rates, or any information on the approximate dollar value that turnover is costing the organization. Although turnover costs did not exist, information regarding advertising costs and expenses was available. In 2007, HR College advertised 66 positions; it is unclear how many of these positions were due to turnover and how many were new positions. Approximately $77,000 was spent to advertise the 66 positions both nationally and locally. This is a large cost for a small organization.
HR College graciously welcomes all potential candidates for open positions. Prospective candidates who are traveling from out of the area are typically offered free travel, meals, and accommodations. In addition, the college offers generous relocation incentives in order to attract new employees to the area. These costs are also increasing due to the amount of turnover. With such a large investment in attracting employees, it would be beneficial to begin focusing on what can be done to retain those hired.
Chapter 3

Literature Review

Retention and voluntary turnover is a topic that has been researched extensively. With increasing turnover costs, employers are trying to get to the root of what is causing employees to leave organizations and what can be done to increase retention. Approximately half of U.S. workers have the expectation of voluntary leaving their job in the next five years (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Numerous theories have been proposed and studied, some of them becoming the basis for new theories. One area that has been disregarded or avoided is how physical location of the organization affects voluntary turnover. This research will incorporate literature and theories on retention to try to determine if the same research can apply to rural organizations. Although the main focus is to determine what factors assist in the retention of rural employees, it is also important to determine what factors are causing employees to exit.

Importance of Retention

Recruitment and retention is so important that it is the number one employment issue for 52% of employers (Langan, 2000, p. 461). There are several reasons why high employee turnover rates can be detrimental to an organization. The most obvious reason is the financial cost of losing an employee. When looking at the financial costs involved, an organization must consider both direct and indirect costs (Wagar, 2006, p. 3). Direct costs typically include separation pay, temporary help, advertising, background checks, orientation, training, etc (Talent Keepers, 2002). Indirect costs are items such as lower or lost productivity and reduced customer loyalty (Wagar, 2006, p. 3). It may appear that
indirect costs only occur in companies that are focused on sales, but indirect costs are relevant for all types of organizations. In the academic sector, employees build relationships with alumni and other donors to help with special funding. If a valued employee leaves, this could decrease the annual gifts that are pledged. Every year, companies are forced to spend exorbitant amounts of their money on costs related to employee turnover. The Bureau of National Affairs reports that on average, an individual will remain in a single position for around 4 years (Langan, 2000, p. 461).

Another reason why retention is important is because it can be difficult to replace a productive and valuable employee. Finding the right candidate is more than looking at education and work history. It is also important that the employee mesh well with co-workers, the corporate culture, and the position for which he or she is being hired. Many employers hope that an employee will have dedication to their job and make the position their own. If you can find an employee who does this, and does it well, it would be a difficult loss to an employer. Currently, many employers are finding it difficult to find candidates who are even interested in their open positions (Langan, 2000, p.461). Many organizations are not able to replace these valuable employees, so they must settle for candidates who can fill the void left by the turnover, even if it is an improper fit. This leads to additional turnover.

*The Unfolding Model*

The common thread to the majority of retention research was a very basic concept of ease and desirability of movement (March and Simon, 1958). March and Simon believed that a combination of how much an employee desired a change and the ease of
the change would determine if an employee was planning to leave an organization. If an employee was offered a more desirable position and did not have to sacrifice much time and energy to accept the new position, the move is more likely to occur. More recently, concepts such as embeddedness, shock, and the unfolding model have all been built from this basic idea (Holtom, et al, 2005).

The unfolding model helps us to identify what causes an employee to voluntarily leave an organization (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). This model maps out five paths to an employee leaving the organization. The key components of these paths are shock, script, job satisfaction, image violation, and job search (Holtom et al, 2005). Shock is an event, positive or negative, that causes an individual to consider leaving his or her current position. This event could be administrative changes, unsolicited job offer, or a change in family circumstances. Individuals are constantly exposed to advertisements seeking job candidates, but most people are comfortable in their positions and resist the change. The majority of these inputs are screened and rejected; therefore, there has to be some form of shock event that leads the employee to consider a new position (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). The second factor is whether or not there is a script, or more simply, a pre-existing plan for leaving current employment. Individuals who plan or intend to leave an organization have a higher likelihood of turnover. One of the main factors in the majority of research, including the unfolding model, is an employee’s satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their current employment. This is an obvious idea, individuals who are satisfied with their employer and current job are less likely to voluntarily leave than employees who are dissatisfied. Image violation focuses mostly on the moral and ethical fit within the organization. An employee who does not believe their employer is being
ethically or morally responsible is more likely to leave the organization. Because individuals spend so much time at their place of employment, it is important that the employee feels like the organization represents his or her ideals or values. Lastly, the unfolding model looks at the alternative job opportunities and activities involved in a job search (Holtom et al, 2005). This is basically the ease of finding and starting a new position.

Those who believe and support the unfolding model strongly believe that self-concept can help predict what path an employee will choose (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). Individuals who have stronger self-concepts have a better idea of who they are and what they want. In order to accomplish what they want, they know that change is necessary. If there is a level of dissatisfaction with the organization, employees who have more alternatives will be more likely to leave than their counterparts (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Research has shown that education level has a negative relationship with job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Parasuraman, 1982). As discussed in the introduction, many individuals have now begun investing in themselves through advanced education and training and will feel freer to leave a position where there is dissatisfaction. Igbaria & Greenhaus (1992) concluded in their research that highly educated management information systems professions were susceptible to higher turnover. The assumption is that this will hold true in the case of rural organizations and in the case of HR College, where the organization is small and the corporate ladder is short with little opportunity for occupational advancement.
**Hypothesis 1:** In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of education and current intentions to remain with the organization.

**Hypothesis 2:** In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of education and job satisfaction.

**Job Satisfaction**

Most academic research focuses on job satisfaction and job alternatives as the key reasons for voluntary turnover. The unfolding model went into some detail on how job alternatives affect individuals’ decisions to remain with or leave an employer. At this point it is important to delve into job satisfaction to see how this predicts retention rates for employees. This can be problematic to measure and study because job satisfaction can be determined in a variety of ways. One researcher states that the key factors that employees look for in employment is a challenging job with opportunity for growth, a performance-based rewards system, and autonomy to complete work assignments, but they do not want rules, regulations, and policy manuals (Langan, 2000). As is evident from the previous sentence, job satisfaction can include a number of different factors that include all areas of the employment system.

Compensation, incentive pay, performance-based rewards systems were discussed frequently in the literature regarding job satisfaction. In many cases, it is not necessarily the amount a person is paid, but the amount he or she is paid in relation to other co-workers (Ramlall, 2004). If an employee receives the same raise percentage as someone they do not feel is as productive, this will decrease motivation and have a negative impact on job satisfaction and job performance. Because many organizations do not have an effective way of determining how productive a worker is, all workers end up receiving similar compensation packages (Sigler, 1999). The valuable employees who can improve
their position will have lower job satisfaction and will have a higher rate of voluntary turnover. Although compensation is a portion of job satisfaction, an increase in pay will typically provide short-lived satisfaction, other factors must also be considered to keep employee retention high (Mitchell, Holton, & Lee, 2001). Many employers and managers try to keep employees who have threatened to leave by offering money. This is a temporary fix to a much larger problem.

To ensure that employees stay interested in their position, managers should give employees meaningful assignments that allow them to be creative and innovative (Sigler, 1999). It is also important to keep workload and assignments balanced. If there is too little work, the employee becomes bored, but too much work causes large amounts of stress to the employee and in turn increases the likelihood of turnover (Gibbons, 2000). There must be open communication between managers and employees to make sure that the workload is balanced. This open communication between manager and employer is also important because there has also been a link found between job satisfaction and relationship with his or her manager. One study showed that 43% of executives polled stated that their relationship with their supervisor had the biggest impact on their overall job satisfaction (Messmer, 2004).

Employees spend many hours of their day at work. In addition to relationships with managers, a large part of an employee’s job satisfaction depends upon relationships with co-workers and the overall organization as well (which will be discussed in the embeddedness section). Studies have suggested that organizations that encourage a fun work environment can increase retention rates (Newstrom, 2002). This probably has a lot to do with an employee’s ability to bond with managers and co-workers in a more casual
and friendly environment. At Southwest Airlines, Herb Kelleher put drastic efforts into creating a fun and satisfying work environment for his employees and in return has drastically reduced turnover rates (Ginsberg & Freedman, 1998). An individual’s perspective on their situation is often in line with the majority. Therefore, if there is a lot of dissatisfaction and high rates of turnover among co-workers, an individual’s rate of retention will also be lessened (Frank, Finnegan, Taylor, 2004). In this case, turnover is causing additional turnover. It is important for employers and managers to build trust between the employees and the organization’s leaders. This is especially true for small, rural organizations. When these rural organizations are already trying to compete against large organizations with limitless capital, one way to retain employees is by creating a loyal and trustworthy working environment and employee base.

Hypothesis 3: In the case of rural employers, there will be a positive relationship between job satisfaction and employees’ current intention to remain with the organization.

Hypothesis 4: In the case of rural employers, there will be a positive relationship between work relationships and job satisfaction.

Embeddedness and Organizational Fit

It has been theorized that one of the primary drivers of the rapid turnover of a new employee is inadequate socialization (Allen, 2006). There are three main stages to socialization for a new employee: anticipatory socialization stage, encounter stage, and adaptation stage (Allen, 2006). The anticipatory socialization stage occurs after an employee has been notified of his or her hire, but before entry into the organization. At this point, the newly hired employee is anxious about the organization’s structure and
culture and the employer should assist in whatever way possible to calm anxieties prior to the first day. The encounter stage occurs when the new employee enters the organization and initially meets co-workers and managers. It is important for employees to feel some form of connection with employees and it is important for employers to encourage this connection. In a study conducted by Sheridan (1992), he showed that firms who emphasized interpersonal relationships between their employees had workers stay on average 14 months longer than other firms. Lastly, the adaptation stage occurs as the employee tries to settle into the organization and adjust to company culture and norm. Studies suggest that newly hired employees who “fit” with firm culture will perform better and in turn become a higher valued employee (Mainiero, 1993). It is the employer’s hope that new employees become embedded in the organization. Embeddedness is the degree to which an individual meshes with his or her position and the organization (Allen, 2006). It is predicted that there is a correlation between job embeddedness and the retention of a new employee. Individuals do not randomly select job positions. They select themselves into or out of these organizations. After becoming enmeshed in the organization and finding that they do not fit, they will leave (Van Vianen, 2000). The employer is responsible for hiring employees who are able to successfully fit and then encourage and strengthen the connection to the organization.

Socialization and fit issues began the framework of a more advanced theory of job embeddedness. Job embeddedness has been built upon over the years and now has a new construct. The new construct consists of three critical aspects of job embeddedness: links, fit, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al, 2001). Links refer to strands that connect the employee to work and non work social, psychological and financial issues. Non-work
factors such as family, church, and hobbies can cause an individual to become attached to a specific geographical location (Mitchell et al., 2001). As the number of links increase, the employee becomes more bound to his or her current position, community or lifestyle. Fit is the perceived compatibility with an organization and the environment in which it is located. A person must determine how well he or she fits into the community and surrounding environment to fully determine whether or not a position is a good fit (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). If a community does not offer religious or social programs that are important to an employee, it lessens the fit and increases the chances of voluntary turnover. Therefore, limited social and religious diversity could decrease the chance of fit because newcomers may have to sacrifice hobbies or comforts. There is also less of a chance for the newcomer to create links in the new community because the activities that could make this possible are not available. The last critical aspect is sacrifice. Sacrifice is the perceived costs and benefits of leaving an organization. Losses could include employee perks, certain benefits, valued colleagues, and preferred geographic location. Holtom & Inderrieden (2006) discuss the idea of sacrifice community. Sacrifice community is leaving an area that one is embedded in to accept another position (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). This refers to having to leave a place that links and fit have already been established. Even if an individual does not have to relocate to take another job, they may have to sacrifice a more desirable commute. This is also a form of sacrifice community.

Overall, embeddedness theory believes that individuals who have a sense of connectedness with the organization and the area where it is located will be more likely to remain with an employer. Even those who have high levels of job satisfaction will be
more likely to leave if they do not have high levels of embeddedness. Organizations have been trying to retain employees through various programs and offering more money, but pay raises and other alternatives are short-lived if employees do not feel they fit emotionally, psychologically and socially with their environment (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). Community embeddedness is one of the many factors that is plaguing rural communities. Even if employees feel enmeshed and comfortable with the organization, if they do not appreciate the geographical location of their employment this could mean another costly turnover for the organization.

For the following hypothesis, the variables of interest will be HR College graduates, level of community sacrifice, and minority employees. HR College graduates who continue as employees are an interesting group because they could be choosing to stay to gain experience or because they actually have a link with the organization. As discussed earlier in this section, link is one of the aspects that are important in the embeddedness theory (Mitchell et al, 2001). It could be argued that these employees are not choosing to stay solely because of a job opportunity, but they feel a link to the HR College community. Sacrifice is another aspect of job embeddedness that was discussed and of them community sacrifice is probably the most significant sacrifice for those considering employment at HR College (Mitchell et al, 2001). A third aspect of job embeddedness is fit and it can and will be hypothesized that with such low levels of diversity at HR College and in Mountain View as a whole, there is a high likelihood that minorities who enter the organization may have a more difficult time with the “fit” portion of embeddedness (Mitchell et al, 2001).
Hypothesis 5: In the case of HR College, there will be a positive correlation between those who have graduated from HR College and their current intentions to remain with HR College.

Hypothesis 6: In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of community sacrifice and employees’ current intentions to remain with the organization.

Hypothesis 7: In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between minority employees and their current intentions to remain with the organization.
Chapter 4

Research Methods

The data collection of this study involved a survey and an interview component. The sample consisted of office support and administrative employees of a rural higher education institution. Faculty employees were intentionally excluded from this sample because many of these employees have set contract dates, tenure tracks, and adjunct positions. In addition union employees were also excluded from the survey. The survey and interview instruments used to conduct this research are provided in Appendices A and B. Further description of the instruments used is provided below.

Survey Instrument Development

The survey instrument used for collecting data was developed specifically for the current study. Survey questions were broke into three parts: demographics, retention/location factors, and job satisfaction. Demographic questions included items such as age, gender, marital status, education, etc. Some of the demographic questions, such as wage and age, were asked in ranges to make the employees feel more comfortable answering the questions and to get a higher response rate. Because the general population of employees at HR College was small, we did not want employees to feel as though they could be easily identified through the information they provided. The retention/location questions contained one-answer choice questions and open-ended questions for those in which more detailed information was being sought. For job satisfaction questions, participants were asked to rate their agreement with various statements based on a Likert Scale (1=strongly disagree to 7 strongly agree).
asked in the job satisfaction section were used in previous research and have been tested for reliability and validity (Bellingham, 2004). Administrative and office support employees received the same survey questionnaire.

Prior to the distribution of the survey, pilot testing was conducted to ensure that the survey was easily understandable and to address any issues or concerns with the questions. The survey was reviewed and completed by a test group. The survey was conducted through the online survey tool, www.surveymonkey.com. An announcement was sent out to the entire campus regarding the survey with a link to the survey monkey questionnaire. This online tool made it possible to begin tracking results immediately, and also provided respondents complete confidentiality.

*Interview Instrument Development*

The participants of the interview portion were randomly selected and then contacted to see if they would be willing to participate in the research. Similar questions were asked during the interviews, but were restructured to open-ended questions. The interviews were conducted to gather additional insights as to what issues could be causing employee turnover at HR College. Due to the personal questions and opinions asked in this survey, it was decided that focus groups or other forms of data collection would not allow participants to be open and honest in their communications. All interview participants were asked the same series of questions and took about 30 -45 minutes to complete.
Variables of Interest

The primary interest of this study was to determine how different demographics and preferences would affect job satisfaction and intention to remain with the organization. Therefore, the two dependent variables that were studied were intent to remain with HR College and job satisfaction. As discussed in the literature section, job satisfaction can be determined by a large variety of factors. Several questions were asked that related to the factors listed above and these answers were then combined and averaged to give an overall job satisfaction average. Once again, the questions were Likert-Scale and this is how the average was calculated. The questions that were asked did not need additional reliability testing as they have been used in previous surveys (Bellingham, 2004). The second dependent variable was intention on remaining with the organization. On the questionnaire, intentions to remain with HR College were broken into two questions: intentions of length to remain with the organization prior to coming to HR College and current intentions to remain with the organization. Throughout this discussion “prior intentions” and “current intentions” will be used to discuss these two variables. There were four possible responses for these variables: 0-5 years, 6-10 years, 11+ years, or retire. The current intentions variable was used as the dependent variable throughout this study.

The independent variables suggested in the hypotheses were education, work relationships, graduate of HR College, minority status, job satisfaction, and community sacrifice. Education was based on the responses to highest level of education received. The four response categories are high school, business/trade school, undergraduate, or graduate. Work relationships variable was determined based on a subset of questions
within the job satisfaction category. Three questions were asked about relationships with managers and co-workers and the Likert-Scale responses were averaged. HR College graduate and minority status variables were based on “yes” or “no” responses on the questionnaire. Job satisfaction as an independent variable was calculated in the same manner as it was for the dependent variable. It was used as an independent variable to analyze the second dependent variable, which was current intentions.

The last independent variable is community sacrifice. As briefly discussed in the literature section, there are different levels of community sacrifice. For the purpose of this study, the community sacrifice variable was determined by three groups: residents, commuters, and relocaters. Because Mountain View is a location where there are several small towns nearby without suitable employment opportunities, participants were considered residents if they lived within a 20-mile radius of HR College. Outside of the 20-mile radius are other rural communities with sufficient career opportunities. Participants who chose to accept employment at HR College, but lived in these other communities, more than 20 miles away, and did not relocate are considered commuters in this survey. Lastly, any individual who moved in order to accept the position at HR College is considered a relocater in this study. These three categories were used as levels of community sacrifice: relocaters had little to no community sacrifice, commuters had moderate levels of community sacrifice, and relocaters had the highest level of community sacrifice.
Methods Applied

These statistics were conducted and calculated by SPSS software. Three types of analysis were used for the research hypotheses. Hypotheses that consisted of two continuous variables were analyzed using Pearson product-moment correlation coefficient (r). For hypotheses with one dichotomous variable and one continuous variable, a comparison of means and ANOVA (F) were used to determine statistical significance. Lastly, two dichotomous variables were analyzed using chi-square ($\chi^2$).
Chapter 5
Results

As discussed in the research methods section of this paper, both surveys and interviews were included as part of the research. After discarding eight incomplete questionnaires, there were 78 participants who completed the online survey, giving the study a response rate of 32%. Ten people were randomly selected to participate in the interview portion of this research, and eight of those individuals who were randomly selected were willing to participate in the study. Table 5-1 shows the demographic representation for those who participated in the survey and interview portions of the study, as well as the demographic representation of the population. The rate of female participation (77%, N=60) was higher than what would be expected in the population (60%, N=142). The median age range of the survey participant group (40–49 years old) was representative of the actual population, with the mean being 44 years old. The rate of minority participation in the survey (3.8%, N=3) was representative of the minority population rate of HR College (3.7%, N=9). There was equal representation of office support and administrative employees, although, these categories are not equal in the population. There was adequate participation in all categories of education level and a large enough sample of HR College graduates to make comparisons. These categories could not be compared to the population because data was not available or was insufficient for these categories.
Table 5-1: Survey Participants, Interview Participants and Population Demographics

<table>
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<th>Survey Sample (N)</th>
<th>Interview Sample (N)</th>
<th>Population(N)</th>
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<tr>
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* Data was either unavailable or insufficient.
Education and Retention

Hypothesis 1: In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of education and current intention to remain with the organization.

The first hypothesis was that there would be a negative relationship between education level and an individual’s current plans to remain with their employer. After analyzing the higher education and current intentions variables using Pearson’s correlation, it was found that there was a negative relationship between the two variables (r=-.339, p<.01). The higher an employee’s education, the less likely they were to remain at HR College. While the median for employees with a high school degree was life-time employment or retirement, the median for employees with a graduate degree was less than 5 years. Interestingly, participants with undergraduate degrees still had a relatively high propensity to stay with the organization for a significant amount of time, but the expectation was not as high as the high school and business/trade school employees.

Interviewed participants’ responses support these statistics and closely mimicked the survey’s findings. All employees who were interviewed with a high school education stated they intended to retire from HR College, but the majority of employees with a graduate degree intended to stay less than five years. Participants with business/trade educations or undergraduates gave mixed responses to the current intention question. Figure 5-1 gives a visual representation of the survey responses and shows the differing trends between the levels of education. Interviews revealed that one cause for this difference is that employees with higher levels of education feel that there is less opportunity for growth in the organization. One participant stated, “It was great to be able to come into the organization in a management position, but the short organizational ladder does not allow for additional upward mobility.” This short ladder is likely what is
causing employees with higher levels of education to have increasing and more rapid turnover rates.

Figure 5-1: Percentage of Turnover Intentions Based on Education Level

Education and Job Satisfaction

*Hypothesis 2:* In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of education and job satisfaction.

The second hypothesis focused on the variables of education and job satisfaction. In this case, there was not a significant relationship between education and job satisfaction when the variables were analyzed using Pearson’s correlation. Figure 5-2 is a visual representation of the data. The average job satisfaction level for each group was determined and then plotted on this graph. The job satisfaction Y-axis is the average
level of job satisfaction for each category. Interestingly, the average job satisfaction for participants with high school degrees is almost identical to those who have obtained graduate degrees and employees with business/trade school degrees have the lowest level of satisfaction of all HR employees. Interview participant responses were similar to those in the survey group. For employees who were interviewed, there was not a clear difference in job satisfaction based on education level. Despite the fact the employees with higher levels of education have a higher turnover rates, in the case of this sample, it appears that it has little to do with job satisfaction. This statistical finding and the interview responses give further support for the opinion that the reason that educated employees are leaving is for better job opportunities, opportunity for growth, and possibly to move to a new location. The hypothesis for the sample of HR College employees is not supported.
**Job Satisfaction and Retention**

*Hypothesis 3:* In the case of rural employers, there will be a positive relationship between job satisfaction and employees’ current intention to remain with the organization.

In the research on retention, the majority of researchers believe and have proven that job satisfaction plays a significant role in the retention of employees. In this sample, there was not a significant relationship between these two variables when analyzed with Pearson’s correlation, and the hypothesis was not supported. Figure 5-3 shows the average job satisfaction level for each retention group. The increases and decreases in job satisfaction fluctuate slightly back and forth amongst the retention categories. This is an extremely interesting finding because most research would suggest that there is a
conclusive link between job satisfaction and retention. Interviewed employees who intended to leave still stated that they had high levels of job satisfaction. This is possible support for the argument that there are different sets of rules for rural and urban employers in trying to attract and retain employees. Either employees are leaving due to shock factors, as referenced in the unfolding model above, or there is another factor, possibly geographic location, causing employees to voluntarily leave (Holtom et al, 2005). Another explanation could be the way the data was grouped. If the categories 0-5 years and 6-10 years are combined, and 11+ years and retirement are combined; comparison of means shows results that are statistically significant (F=5.457, p=.022).

Figure 5-3: Average Job Satisfaction Based on Turnover Intention
Work Relationships and Job Satisfaction

Hypothesis 4: In the case of rural employers, there will be a positive relationship between work relationships and job satisfaction.

Research studies that focused on job satisfaction and embeddedness discussed the importance of relationships with peers as an opportunity to increase job satisfaction and decrease turnover (Allen, 2006 & Gibbons, 2000). In the case of the sample there was a very strong relationship between work relationships, both with supervisors and co-workers, and job satisfaction (r=.769, p<.001). Pearson’s correlation was used to determine statistical significance. However, when work relationship was correlated with current intention to remain with the organization, there was not a significant relationship. From these correlations, it can be stated that positive work relationships do increase job satisfaction, but this does not necessarily lead to the retention of the employees. These findings were supported by employee interviews. Six of the eight interview participants stated that work relationships did affect job satisfaction, however, when asked about what affects retention, job satisfaction and work relationships were not mentioned. Work relationships that were discussed focused mostly on informal relationships. Although HR College does sponsor events as means of socialization between employees, it appears that the majority of work relationships develop from daily and informal interactions.

HR College Graduates and Retention

Hypothesis 5: In the case of HR College, there will be a positive correlation between those who have graduated from HR College and their current intentions to remain with HR College.
Because embeddedness links individuals with an organization and the community, it could stand to reason that individuals who have graduated from HR College and were currently employed with the organization would have a lower rate of voluntary turnover. Interviews appeared to support this hypothesis. Participants who were interviewed and who have graduated from HR College stated that they decided to accept a position with the organization because they felt connected to the environment and planned retire from the college; although some respondents did express concern about their long-term growth within the organization. However, after running a comparison of means, the relationship between these two variables was found not to be statistically significant in the survey sample. Figure 5-4 gives assists in visualizing the responses of participants. Because there were only 16 participants in the sample that graduated from HR College, the percentage of respondents who selected each retention level were used. This gives a more equal visual for comparison. Other than there being a slightly higher percentage of retirees for the non-HR College graduate group and a slightly higher percentage of 0-5 year current intentions for the HR College graduate responders, there is very little difference between these two groups. In addition, a second comparison of means was run comparing current intention and HR College graduate variables for only the employees with a Bachelor’s Degree or higher. This was done to eliminate a higher education confounding variable. This second analysis did not show statistical significance between the two variables. This hypothesis for the sample of HR College employees was not supported.
Community Sacrifice and Retention

*Hypothesis 6:* In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between level of community sacrifice and employees’ current intentions to remain with the organization.

The next hypothesis predicted that individuals that relocated to the area to accept a position at HR College would have higher rates of turnover. As discussed in the Research Methods section: local residents lived within a 20-mile radius prior to accepting a position at HR College; commuters lived outside of the 20-mile radius and did not relocate; and relocate participants moved in order to accept their position. In this sample, Pearson’s correlation found that these two variables had a strong negative correlation ($r=-.402$, $p<.01$). Those who relocated were likely to leave the organization sooner than those who were local or commuted. As discussed in the literature review section, those who relocated had higher levels of community sacrifice than those who lived locally or
commuted (Holtom & Inderrieden, 2006). Figure 5-5 is a chart that shows the relationship to community sacrifice and employees’ intentions to remain with the organization. According to the chart, based on those who participated in the study, there are clearly more local residents hired than commuters or employees who have relocated. In addition, those who are local residents have a higher level of intention to remain with HR College, whereas the majority of employees who have relocated are presently looking for new positions or plan to stay for less than five years. Almost half of all commuters also have intentions to stay less than five years. Statistics for the sample of HR College employees show that commuters have lower levels of job satisfaction than do local residents ($r=-.243$, $p<.05$). Interview data supports the survey findings. Those who relocated had a greater likelihood of intent to leave the organization. For interviewees who commuted, the responses were mixed. The main concerns raised by commuting employees were increasing gas prices and time spent traveling. Local residents were likely to remain with HR College long term. The significance of this chart is that the employees who cost more to hire, due to moving and relocation expenses, are staying for significantly shorter periods of time.
Hypothesis 7: In the case of rural employers, there will be a negative relationship between minority employees and their current intentions to remain with the organization.

The last area of interest was the employment intentions of HR College minority employees. Because these employees were employed in an organization and a community with low levels of diversity, it was expected that there would be higher turnover rates for minority employees. In this sample, there was not a correlation between the minority employee variable and current intention variable. A comparison of means was used to analyze the variables. There could be several reasons for these findings. The data suggests that minority employees’ prior intentions were significantly shorter than their current intentions ($r=-.248$, p<.01). This means that immediately after accepting the job, they planned on staying for a shorter term than their current intentions.
Additional information could not be inferred from an interview source, as there were no minority employees who were randomly selected that chose to participate in the interview assessment. In relation to the literature discussed above, minority employees would have had higher levels of anxiety and uncertainty in the anticipatory stage, but have been very successful and anxieties have calmed in the adaptation stage. Therefore, it is possible that minority employees do feel a sense of embeddedness in the organization and the community. Another key component is the sample of minority employees was incredibly low, with only three minority participants. This sample size was too small to draw any realistic conclusions as to the affects of minority retention. However, the limited number of minority employees in the population and the sample could produce support for the hypothesis. Due to this small sample size, no additional correlations or graphs were conducted.

*Non-Hypothesized Findings*

The first set of interesting non-hypothesized findings has to do with gender. Comparison of means was used to analyze the variables that referenced gender. Women have significantly better working relationships with co-workers and managers than do men (F=14.941, p<.001) and higher levels of job satisfaction (F=4.012, p=.049). Despite this fact women have a significantly higher current intention to leave than do men (F=4.429, p.039). This could be due to a number of reasons, but our sample population surveys and interviews have given us a few ideas. Women who work at HR College tend to not have as many higher education degrees (F=7.714, p=.007), hold 77% of the office support positions, and in turn have much lower wages (F=27.541, p<.001). In addition to
these factors, chi squared indicates that women employed at HR College are significantly less likely to be married ($\chi^2=5.571$, $p=.018$). Although this may seem like an issue that is irrelevant our survey and interview responses prove otherwise. Not only are women leaving for better wages and job opportunities, but it has also been expressed through surveys that women are leaving because they are not finding suitable partners in the area.

In close relation to the finding above, it was also found that employees who have relocated to the area to work at HR College are significantly more likely to be single ($\chi^2=9.286$, $p=.002$). Although the exact reason for this is statistically unknown, the open-ended questions on the survey gave an opportunity to evaluate this finding further. Interviews and surveys have expressed the frustrations of finding partners or spouses employment in the area after relocation. It is possible that this is what causes many married or candidates in committed relationships not to consider relocating to the area. Mountain View has few job opportunities in the community, especially outside of the service sector.

The next area that a lot of statistical significance was found was with the variable higher education. Employees who had increasing levels of education were more likely to be administrators ($F=20.379$, $p<.001$) and have higher wages ($r=.529$, $p<.01$). In addition, individuals who were willing to relocate had significantly higher levels of education ($F=19.534$, $p<.001$). These are not surprising figures, because it makes sense that employees would only be willing to relocate if they were going to make a higher wage. It was already stated that employees who relocated had higher rates of turnover and current intentions to stay with the employer were much shorter; however, the statistics also found that these employees intended to remain with HR College for shorter
periods when they initially accepted the position ($r=-.339$, $p<.01$). Therefore, before even relocating to the area, the majority of these employees’ intentions were to remain with the employer for five years or less and, in most cases, the intentions have changed. This matches closely the scripts aspect of the unfolding model discussed in the literature section (Lee & Mitchell, 1994). It would appear that the current intentions would have less to do with embeddedness or job satisfaction and be related more to the intentions prior to the relocation. In fact, the sample population showed a clear relationship between an employee’s prior intentions and his or her current intentions ($r=.396$, $p<.01$) and the prior intentions of those who have relocated was significantly higher than the prior intentions for those in the commuter and local resident groups ($F=16.279$, $p<.001$). Further discussion of these findings and the relationship to current literature will be continued in the next section.
Chapter 6
Discussion

By using the data collected from this research, there are several statistical inferences that can be made in regards to rural academic institutions. Many of the findings contradicted what was expected from the literature. These contradictions are in large part due to the location and type of institution being studied. Most of the research has focused on retention efforts to organizations as a whole and there was not a lot of consideration given to outliers, such as rural communities. Although HR College has not yet begun tracking retention or forming retention plans, it is clear that they should look outside of what is already presented in the literature, because they are facing a separate set of turnover issues than the majority of other employers. In their case, employees are leaving because of the lack of career and social opportunity that the organization and the community have to offer.

The literature that was discussed on employees with higher education has similar outcomes to that in the general population. Employees who have invested money into obtaining degrees are increasingly driven by opportunities for career growth and higher wages. Although in our study, it was found the HR College administrators made significantly more money than office support, many of these employees still felt that they could be making more money in other geographic locations. During the research interviews, several participants stated that compensation was “fair for this area”. As level of education increased, especially in the case of employees who had graduate degrees, an administrative employee who was interviewed stated that their time at HR College was simply a stepping stone to gain hands-on knowledge and experience.
One of the most interesting findings that was observed in this research is that retention is not necessarily determined by job satisfaction. In this sample, it did not matter if an employee was satisfied with their current position or not, because it did not affect the outcome of turnover intentions. Employees who were interviewed that were considering leaving within the next five years main reasons for leaving included: personal and spousal career opportunities, shorter commute, and/or distance from family or friends. None of the employees who were interviewed indicated that they were considering leaving the organization because of lack of job satisfaction. This contradicts previous findings and further leads me to believe that there are a different set of variables that determine job retention and voluntary turnover in the case of rural organizations (Langan, 2000).

In this sample, it was found that work relationships did increase job satisfaction. The disappointing part of this finding is that, as stated earlier, job satisfaction does not determine retention. A vast majority of this research was based on the assumption that if job satisfaction was increased, employees would be happy in their positions, and retention rates would improve. Although factors that caused employees to have increased job satisfaction and factor that increased retention rates were identified, there was an inability to link variables in a way that would create any solutions to the problems plaguing this organization.

Prior intentions variable also played an interesting role in the data and has interesting repercussions for the employer. The sample showed that an employee’s current longevity intentions had a very significant relationship to prior intentions. This means that if an employee came to an organization with a 5-year-plan, it was highly
likely that they were continuing with that plan. Interviewed participants were asked to discuss their prior intentions and current intentions. In the majority of cases, the interviewed employee’s decision about length of employment at HR College went relatively unchanged. Therefore, it could be argued that it doesn’t matter if you try to increase job satisfaction or implement a socialization program for new employees because they are going to follow the plan that they had when they entered the organization. It could also be argued that since HR College currently does not have the appropriate programs to create embeddedness in the organization that it is not causing employees to want to stay for longer periods.

The last main issue is that of employees who relocate in order to work at HR College. These employees were found to have the highest turnover rates and there were no variables identified that were in the employers’ power to decrease this rate. It is important for rural academic institutions to bring in employees from the outside with a fresh perspective and new ideas, however, these are the same employees who are creating the greatest cost to the organization through having to pay for relocation expenses and, in a couple of years, the turnover cost. Some type of solution needs to be developed to help keep these employees longer. Unfortunately, without additional research and identifying the appropriate variables, the solutions that need to be focused on will remain unknown.

Overall, the interviews were relatively consistent with the survey sample. As discussed in previous sections, in the majority of the hypothesis, the interview responses collaborated and provided support for the survey sample results. Employees who were interviewed had relatively high levels of job satisfaction. The majority of respondents indicated that they had autonomy, ability to be creative and make the position his or her
own, and good to excellent working relationships with their supervisors and co-workers. In addition, the majority of employees liked their current positions and had few negative things to say about their job. When this group was asked what they liked most about the organizations, answers included the personal and supportive relationships within and between departments; having an admirable and achievable goals and mission; and that the main purpose of the organization, the students, being the focus of decisions that are made. At HR College, the majority of the employees understand that their sole purpose of being at the organization is to create an extraordinary learning environment for young minds. One resounding concern that was evident from the interviews was in regards to college finances. Many who were interviewed felt that funds could and should be allocated differently to create a more stable and secure work environment for the future.

At the end of this study, it is highly probable that rural communities do experience turnover issues that are not currently a focus of retention research. In the rural academic sector sample, statistics that contrast what is expected in current research was observed. If one of the main causes of turnover in rural organizations is geographic locations, there is little an organization can to do decrease the turnover rate.
Chapter 7
Conclusion

Overall, it was found that even if employees are satisfied with their jobs and are embedded in the organization, it is still possible to lose employees due to other factors, including those that an organization has little to no power to change, such as geographic location. The first and most important thing for HR College, and rural businesses in general, is to begin tracking and keeping records of turnover rate. It is difficult to identify the rate and cost of turnover if adequate records are not kept. Another important piece to decreasing voluntary turnover is by developing a retention plan or policy. The first step in this plan, and something that all organizations should be doing, is conducting exit interviews (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). If employers want to be effective at decreasing turnover rates, then they must begin listening to what the causes are for past turnover. This is valuable information that could possibly ward off additional loses of employees.

After viewing the research results, it is important for the organization to evaluate the internal and external factors that are causing turnover. Once HR College becomes aware of the key factors that are causing employees to leave, they can attempt to try to control these factors or begin recruiting employees with an expected higher retention rate. For example, it has been proven that relocaters have a higher turnover rate. HR College may want to consider higher a qualified local candidate before a candidate with similar qualifications that would require relocation. Variables such as education level, marital status, and community sacrifice should be given a large amount of consideration. Questions such regarding the applicants future aspirations should be included in the
interview process as well. As evident from the study, there is a correlation between prior intentions and current intentions. Knowing where the person would like to be in five years could give some indications as to if they are planning to stay long term. A new recruitment and selection process would be required to target candidates that fall into high retention rate categories.

As is evident from this study, level of job satisfaction does not directly determine an individual’s retention. Employers should be aware of shocks and create systems for reducing or attempting to alleviate the strain and stress of shocks (Mitchell, Holtom, & Lee, 2001). There should be open communication between employees and managers so that shocks can be recognized early, before an employee decides to leave the organization.

After researching the inner workings of this organization, one suggestion for HR College is to evaluate the results and determine if there is a more effective way to attract employees who have a better chance of being retained. If money is going to be spent to relocate an employee, the organization should also provide this employee with adequate support to ensure a successful immersion into the organization and the community. For example, if the relocating employee is married, career counseling programs should be provided to assist the spouse in finding adequate employment in the surrounding areas. Dual career couples are becoming common and provisions need to be made for spouses of employees.

The academic sector is a difficult area for which to recruit. Students are drawn to educational institutions that have the best faculty and staff, and that will provide the most enriching educational experience. The group of employees who were surveyed at HR
College are responsible for scheduling classes, keeping the students and college property safe, creating a financial stable organization, and assist students in the college “experience”. If turnover rates become too high and positions go unfilled, it could cost an academic institution more than money and it could cost the college desirable students and their reputation.
Chapter 8

Study Limitations & Future Research

First, because this was a case study for one university, the results may not necessarily be able to be applied to all situations. The targeted population in this case was a specific rural, academic institution. The participation rate of the survey was 32% of the population being studied. Another key issue was that the population itself was rather small and, in turn, the number of participants was relatively small as well. The third major limitation was the lack of diversity in the population and the study. Because there were very few minority employees at HR College, we received a very small minority sample size and were unable to make any decisive conclusions as to the affect of rural communities on minority employees.

Areas for future research would include further studies on the relationships of variables other than retention expectations and job satisfaction. There were clearly some unexpected relationships that presented themselves in this study and future studies on these variables would be beneficial to explaining the retention rates for rural employers and their employees. Although this study alludes to the fact that geographic location plays a just as significant, if not more, role in employees’ employment decisions than job satisfaction and embeddedness, there clearly needs to be additional measurement instruments and studies developed to make any solid conclusions. In addition, since job satisfaction as a means of determining employee retention was not supported in the case of this rural academic institution, it is necessary to find additional variables that can help to predict what causes voluntary turnover.
Future studies should also include more than one small rural employer. Although the size of my population and sample were considered a limitation, it is an area that is in much need of research. Because these employers are small, the turnover costs often affect them on a much greater level. Therefore, future research should not just ignore these small institutions and focus on larger rural organizations, but possibly combining multiple small rural organizations.
Bibliography


Appendix A

Survey Instrument

Demographics
1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Marital Status:
4. Number of Children:
5. Age of Children:
6. Do you identify yourself as a racial/ethnic minority?
7. Highest Level of Education Received:
8. Job Status: Administrative, Supporting Staff, Facilities Services
9. What is your wage? $20,000 or less $20,001 –$30,000 $30,001-$40,000 $40,001-$50,000 $50,001 and over
10. Are you a graduate of the college?

Retention/Location Factors
11. Which of these best describes your situation prior to being hired?
   • I lived within 20 miles, one way, of the college prior to being hired.
   • I planned to commute more than 20 miles, one way, to work at the college.
   • I relocated in order to work at the college.
12. Which of these best describes your current situation?
   • I currently live within 20 miles, one way, of the college.
   • I commute more than 20 miles, one way, to work at the college.
13. How did the rural location of the college affect your decision to work here?
14. If there were an organization that were identical to the college, but located in an urban area, would you consider moving?
15. When you first accepted your position at the college, what were your intentions as far as the length of time you planned to stay?
16. What is your current position in regards to how long you plan to remain with the college? What are the determining factors of this plan?

Job Satisfaction
Please rank the following questions on the following scale:
Completely Disagree, Disagree, Somewhat Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Somewhat Agree, Agree, Completely Agree
17. I feel valued and affirmed at work.
18. Most interactions at work are positive.
19. I feel recognized and appreciated at work.
20. I’m engaged in meaningful work.
21. I feel free to be who I am at work.
22. I feel free to do things the way I like at work.
23. My values fit with organizational values.
24. I trust our leadership team.
25. I trust my co-workers.
26. I have good friends at work.
27. I feel involved in decisions that affect our organizational community.
28. Creativity and innovation are supported.
29. I know what is expected of me at work.
30. I know someone at work who encourages my development.
31. My manager cares about me as a person.
32. I am fairly compensated.
Appendix B

Interview Instrument

Demographics
1. Marital Status:
2. Number of Children:
3. Age of Children:
4. Highest Level of Education Received:
5. Are you a graduate of the college?

Retention/Location Factors
6. Where did you live prior to working at the college?
7. Where do you currently live?
8. How did the rural location of the college affect your decision to work here?
9. When you first accepted your position at the college, what were your intentions as far as the length of time you planned to stay (5 year plan, life-time employment, etc)?
10. What is your current position in regards to how long you plan to remain with the college? What are the determining factors of this plan?

Job Satisfaction
11. Describe your relationship with your supervisor.
12. Describe your relationship with your co-workers
13. What are your feelings about the overall leadership of the college?
14. What are the things you like the most about your job?
15. What are the things you like least about your job?
16. What are your feelings about the company culture?
17. What are your feelings about the compensation?