New Faculty Onboarding: An Opportunity for Connection and Commitment

Cam Caldwell[1] & Tangela Rutledge[2]

[1] No Affiliation, St. George, UT, USA

[2] Director of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Huntsville City, AL, USA

Correspondence: Cam Caldwell, St. George, UT, USA. E-mail: cam.caldwell@gmail.com

Abstract

The effectiveness of a college or university in onboarding new faculty has a major impact on its ability to integrate new instructors into the organization and sends a powerful message about the organization's values. That onboarding process builds or undermines trust and can leave a lasting impression on the new employee. Unfortunately, the onboarding process in most organizations is poorly handled and new faculty are frequently given less than a week to prepare their courses and to learn the policies of their employer – a time frame that is far from adequate and that has a negative impact on teaching effectiveness. The purpose of this paper is to identify the importance of the new faculty onboarding process and to identify ten recommendations for colleges and universities to improve their ability to prepare new faculty to be successful as new members of their academic community.

Keywords: academic leadership, duties owed to employees, effective human resource management, faculty onboarding

1. Introduction

Although onboarding has been widely acknowledged as an important part of the transitioning process for new employees (Davila & Pina-Rivera, 2018; Bauer & Erdogan, 2011; Steing & Christensen, 2010), research has shown that colleges and universities do not do any better at transitioning their employees than other types of organizations (Cullen & Harris, 2008). The challenge facing new faculty involves preparing adequately to teach assigned courses within an extremely compressed timeframe while simultaneously adapting to a new organization culture and new responsibilities and procedures. Adapting to a new college or university teaching platform can also be challenging and can inhibit the ability of a new faculty member to build the trust of his or her students.

Although the advantages of effectively onboarding new faculty are often widely acknowledged, financial realities and other limitations make faculty onboarding difficult. At many schools, the onboarding process is essentially limited to completing personnel forms and administrative paperwork – especially for the many part-time and adjunct faculty members who now make up a huge percentage of university instructors.

We begin this paper by briefly identifying the importance of onboarding as an important socialization process for every organization. We cite insightful information about onboarding from highly regarded academic and practical sources. Following that introduction, we then propose a checklist of ten recommendations for colleges and universities to incorporate into their new faculty onboarding process and explain how those onboarding suggestions benefit the new faculty, their students, and the academic institutions themselves. We conclude the paper with encouragement to administrators, deans, department chairs, human resource professionals, and existing faculty as they consider the transitions needs of their new faculty colleagues.

2. Understanding Onboarding

The onboarding process includes the comprehensive socialization and integration of new employees from the moment that they have accepted a job offer until well into their first year of employment (Du Toit, 2019). As Murphy and Burgio-Murphy (2022) have explained, effective onboarding is a critical priority in retaining high quality employees – especially at a time when new faculty are under a great deal of stress and have little opportunity to prepare their courses before beginning a new semester. Onboarding is the critical process of introducing a new employee to an organization, explaining the organization's culture and expectations, clarifying its norms and policies, and

demonstrating to the new individual that (s)he is valued as an important organizational asset in achieving its mission (Acevedo & Yancey, 2011).

Unfortunately, onboarding research confirms that most organizations do a less than ideal job of bringing new employees into their organization (Maurer, 2015). Done effectively, employee onboarding can be a major contributor to employee retention (Maurer, 2015), productivity (Buckner-Hayden, 2014), and job satisfaction (Snell, 2006). According to research by Gallup (2017) however, 88% of employees believe that their onboarding process needed improvement. One-third of nearly 1,000 respondents reported that have left their jobs within six months, with an alarming 17% leaving the job within three months and 50% leaving their jobs within two years (Kolmar, 2022).

Sims (2011, p.6) explained that many employees experience "new job remorse" when they leave one job and transition to another – largely due to the ineffective nature of their new company's onboarding process and the failure of their new organization in assimilating them into their organization. According to research conducted by Gallup (Clifton & Harter, 2019), the relationship with the employee's supervisor was often cited as a major reason why employees left their new positions. In contrast with companies that do a poor job of onboarding, the Brandon Group reported that a strong onboarding process improves "new hire retention by 82% and productivity by over 70%" (Laurano, 2015).

3. Onboarding and New Faculty

Williams-Smith (2017) has emphasized that colleges and universities need to substantially upgrade the quality of new faculty onboarding and has noted that the failure to onboard new faculty effectively is a deterrent to faculty retention, faculty commitment, and the quality of student instruction. At a time when universities and colleges are increasingly reliant upon temporary, contract, and part-time adjunct faculty, the failure to onboard these new faculty members can seriously undermine the quality of education offered by those schools. Unfortunately, the growing number of adjunct and part-time faculty are often treated as "disposable employees" (Nica, 2017) with 25% of those adjuncts and part-timers qualifying for public assistance because of their low salaries and nearly a third reporting that they earn less than $25,000 per year – even when they hold PhDs from accredited schools (Flaherty, 2020).

Despite the growing body of literature about the importance of new faculty onboarding, the financial challenges facing many colleges and universities often result in those institutions bringing in new faculty just before the beginning of their first semester of teaching. Unrealistically, these new faculty are nonetheless expected to "hit the ground running" and perform well despite minimal socialization and integration efforts (Howley, 2020). The recognition of the problem of inadequate faculty assimilation –especially for women (Driscoll et al., 2009) and minorities (Whitaker, Montgomery and Acosta (2015)—is well documented by many scholars (Scott et al., 2016; McAuliff, 2020).

Classroom incivility toward faculty has also become an issue of significant concern for new faculty that many universities have failed to adequately address (Bjorklund & Reading, 2010; Dechter, 2007) and is a characteristic of an increasingly uncivil society where respect and trust of leaders have deteriorated (Harrington, 2017). Overworked faculty and staff at many colleges and universities are as prone to the "quiet quitting" response of 50% of the nation's workforce (Harter, 2022), and are reluctant to take on the extra tasks associated with onboarding new colleagues, teaching overload courses, and assisting new faculty with the other challenges that those new faculty members may face (Vidra, 2022).

A major issue with onboarding for new faculty is the inability of the Top Management Team in many organizations to assign ultimate responsibility for onboarding (Davila & Pina-Ramirez, 2018). Like the Abbott and Costello "Who's on First" routine, the uncertainty about the responsibility for onboarding is as confusing a problem at colleges and universities as it is in many other organizations (Harpelund, 2019). The fact that the quality of academic education is dependent upon the efforts of many part-time faculty who are often inadequately onboarded portends problems that are readily predictable and notably depressing (Kezar, DePaolo, & Scott, 2019).

4. Ten Recommendations for New Faculty Onboarding

Clearly, there are many challenges facing today's beleaguered colleges and universities as they struggle with a post-pandemic decrease in enrollment, reluctance on the part of politicians and donors to adequately support education, and the realities of an inflationary economy which depletes available resources. Despite those very real challenges, universities and colleges that fail to address the need to effectively onboard new faculty do so at their own peril. The following are ten recommendations for colleges and universities to incorporate as they seek to address the pressing problem of onboarding new faculty.

4.1 Create a Guidance Team to Oversee Onboarding and Ensure Accountability

The value of a Guidance Team is its ability to ensure the accountability of the onboarding process, including the

constant monitoring of the action steps necessary for successful onboarding to occur (Scholtes, Joiner, & Streibel, 2018). The onboarding process needs to be accountable to a high-level line administrator reporting directly to the University President who is empowered to see that the onboarding process is carried out according to a well-articulated plan (cf., Caldwell & Peters, 2018). A common error in coordinating onboarding is to assign that responsibility to the Human Resource Department, despite the fact that Human Resources is entirely a staff support function and has no line responsibility over individual departments (cf. Gomez-Mejia, Balkin, & Cardy, 2015).

4.2 Begin Onboarding as Soon as a Hiring Decision is Made

Immediately after a hiring offer is made and accepted, the onboarding process begins. In the modern digital world, employees expect that their new organization will connect with them virtually to begin the assimilation process (Rossi, 2019). Failing to establish that immediate virtual relationship is inconsistent with the psychological contract that today's employees have about the employer-employee relationship (cf. Rousseau, 1995). The first ninety days after a job offer is made and accepted is crucial in creating a positive impression on new faculty (Watkins, 2013).

4.3 Identify Champions who Understand the Importance of Onboarding New Faculty

Although colleagues from their own academic departments are ideally their best mentors, it is even more important to identify champions who recognize the vital importance of mentoring new faculty when committed champions are not available within those departments (Khan et al., 2021). The faculty mentoring role should include socializing new faculty into the culture and practices of an organization but should also include assistance with such important factors as understanding the intricacies of a university's online teaching platform (cf. Berk et al., 2005). Mentoring new faculty includes understanding their unique individual and family transition needs and helping the mentored employee to smoothly address those needs (Eisner, 2014).

4.4 Intensively Train Deans, Department Heads, Program Heads, and Mentors about the Importance of Onboarding

Although department heads, deans, program heads, and mentoring champions may be on vacation during part of the year prior to the arrival of new faculty, it is essential that those individuals be provided with extensive training – including standards as to their individual accountability associated with assimilating new faculty (Jucovy, 2001). Typically, the Human Resource Management staff can prepare and oversee providing this training in their staff role (Page-Tickell, 2022).

4.5 *Monitor and Track the Onboarding Progress of all New Faculty by Someone Outside of their Departments*

Because accountability for the onboarding of new faculty is so important, it is critically necessary to ensure that individual employee needs are being met in the onboarding process. The reality of the accountability process is that individual employees will be far more honest in identifying their onboarding needs when those needs are monitored by individuals outside of their own department to ensure the confidentiality of the feedback that they provide about onboarding (McCallister, 2010).

4.6 Ensure that New Faculty have Immediate Access to Critical Information about Teaching Assignments Including Access to the School's Teaching Platform

Unfortunately, many colleges and universities do not provide new faculty members with access to a university's online teaching system until after that employee has completed all paperwork – a process that is often time consuming and unnecessarily delaying. Especially in cases where a late offer is made to an incoming employee, new faculty must have sufficient time to prepare for the classes that (s)he is assigned to teach. Information about classes and other vital information about policies and practices should also be shared with incoming faculty so that they can adequately prepare for their new assignments – even if those employees are not yet on the college or university payroll (Caldwell & Caldwell, 2016).

4.7 Hold Deans, Department Heads, and Program Heads Personally Responsible for Onboarding All New Faculty

Successful onboarding requires support and accountability for those who are administratively responsible for academic achievement. Evaluation of those administrators should include holding them accountable for ensuring that each faculty member has the resources that are needed to be optimally successful in teaching. Evaluating the effectiveness of onboarding must become a part of that assessment process (Joiner, Scholtes, & Streibel, 2018).

4.8 Provide Personalized Training for Each New Faculty Member by Top Performers who are Highly Skilled

Information technology, teaching platform, and learning system experts must be available to provide one-on-one training for new faculty who are struggling with obtaining access to an online teaching platform on a timely basis. The failure to provide that training hamstrings the ability of new faculty to perform their teaching responsibilities

effectively and is a violation of the university's psychological contract with the new employee (Caldwell & Peters, 2018).

4.9 Recognize and Reward Departments and Programs that Transition New Faculty Effectively, Especially when those New Faculty are High Performers.

The cost of recruiting, selecting, hiring, and training but then losing a new faculty member destroys the benefits achieved by hiring a talented employee and is a waste of organizational resources. Moreover, when new faculty leave the organization because of poor onboarding practices, the image of the academic institution and its brand is sullied in the minds of those who are aware of the failures of the organization (Shea-Van Fossen & Vredenburgh, 2014). Departments and programs who successfully retain new faculty, especially faculty who are high performers, should be noted by the organization and the many individuals responsible for that success should be acknowledged and rewarded (cf. Pfeffer, 1998).

4.10 Identify Opportunities to Constantly Improve the Onboarding Process by Following Up Extensively with New Faculty.

Involving new faculty members in the process of constantly improving the onboarding process enables those individuals who have just experienced that process to offer helpful suggestions that can facilitate the onboarding process' continuous improvement (cf. Fundin & Bergman, 2003). The best evidence about process improvement often comes from the individuals who have been the beneficiaries or the victims of that process (cf. Carter, 2008; Mitra, 2016).

These ten recommendations are aligned with the best practices of new employee onboarding (Bersin, 2022) and merit the thoughtful consideration of colleges and universities which recognize the importance of their faculty members as the key to delivering excellence in education (Shill, 2022).

5. Conclusion

The evidence is abundantly clear that the delivery of high-quality education is a function of hiring well-qualified faculty, developing and retaining those faculty, and supporting them as valued resources and important members of their academic institutions (Cunningham & Gresso, 1993; Hilliard III, 2000). Creating a culture of excellence requires the united efforts of an entire organization and begins from the top down (Schein & Schein, 2016). Ultimately, an organization's culture has always been a function of the effectiveness of its leadership (Northouse, 2021).

There is little question that colleges and universities are struggling to maintain their ability to provide an excellent product to their students in a knowledge-, wisdom-, and information-based economy (Covey, 2004). The challenges facing universities of all sizes and types is monumental in a world that is volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (Mack et al., 2015; Waller et al., 2019). In their compelling book, **The Innovative University**, Clayton Christensen and Henry Eyring (2011) acknowledge the challenges of the many universities and colleges that are struggling to be effective. They emphasize the importance of recognizing the importance of creating strong organizational cultures that value employees and help them to succeed.

As colleges and universities examine their processes and systems for recruiting, selecting, hiring, and retaining excellent faculty members, the importance of the new faculty onboarding process stands out as a vital factor upon which their present and future success are dependent (Murphy & Burgio-Murphy, 2022). Unfortunately, failing to prepare effectively in onboarding new faculty – like many failures in every facet of life – is preparing to fail. Students, their families, their future employers, and society at large depend upon colleges and universities providing a quality education. That goal can be facilitated by implementing well-established principles of high-quality new faculty onboarding.

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