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# **Strengthening Faculty Retention and Belonging: Applying and Expanding Job Embeddedness Theory through an Onboarding Initiative in Higher Education**

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## **Abstract**

This study explores the impact of a supplemental onboarding program on new, full time, non-tenure-eligible faculty integration within a university's education department, applying the Job Embeddedness Theory (JET) as a guiding framework. Seven newly hired instructors participated in a year-long, intentionally designed onboarding experience aimed at fostering professional development and a sense of belonging. Using qualitative methods—including interview questions in open-ended surveys and group discussions—the study analyzed participants' perceptions across five emergent themes: positive overall experience, valuable presentations, skill and knowledge growth, academic community integration, and suggestions for improvement. The program's structure supported the development of meaningful links, alignment with departmental culture, and investment in experiences that increased the perceived sacrifice of leaving. Findings informed the creation of the LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings), which maps onboarding influences to JET dimensions. Results suggest that well-designed onboarding programs can enhance faculty retention by strengthening social and professional ties, promoting cultural alignment, and deepening emotional investment. This research offers actionable insights for institutions seeking to build onboarding programs that cultivate embeddedness and reduce attrition.

*Keywords:* new faculty onboarding; job embeddedness; seminar design

## Introduction

For most industries, the process of advertising, interviewing, hiring, onboarding, integrating, and retaining a new employee can be laborious, expensive, and imprecise. Higher education is not immune to these challenges, as the hiring cycle involves many current employees, is expensive, and often requires more than six months to complete (Anft, 2022). University faculty onboarding plays a critical role in ensuring new hires transition successfully into the hiring department and, if new to the field, into higher education. New faculty often face challenges in navigating institutional culture, balancing research and teaching expectations, and establishing professional networks (Masaracchia et al., 2024; Young-Brice et al., 2022). Absent structured and intentional onboarding support, new faculty are prone to experience increased stress and lower job satisfaction; both of which negatively impact retention and long-term success (Bowers et al., 2023; Caldwell & Rutledge, 2023). Given these challenges, institutions increasingly invest in intentional onboarding initiatives to support faculty development.

Faculty turnover imposes significant financial and institutional costs, particularly when turnover is frequent (Pappas et al., 2022). The direct financial liabilities include advertising, travel, and relocation expenses, while indirect costs stem from disruptions in quality and predictability of course offerings, student advising, research productivity, and institutional stability. High faculty turnover can also negatively affect student performance and departmental cohesion, making faculty retention a critical issue in higher education (Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2017).

At the “Best University” the teacher education department hired seven new faculty members simultaneously. Recognizing the opportunities associated with welcoming an unusually large cohort, an onboarding program was implemented and designed to integrate them into the department. The program was guided by the premise that intentional onboarding can foster professional integration, enhance collaboration, and improve early-career faculty retention (Baker & DiPiro, 2019). This study explores the impact of this initiative on faculty experiences and professional development.

Specifically, our research question is the following: What role does a supplemental onboarding program play in helping a batch hire of new faculty feel part of the department's academic community at a university?

This study contributes to research related to faculty onboarding by examining a relatively large cohort of new instructional faculty. While the existing research tends to focus on new hire orientation methods and faculty mentoring relationships, supplemental onboarding strategies through the lens of Job Embeddedness Theory (JET) were considered (Crossley et al., 2007; Erkutlu & Chafra, 2016; Li et al., 2022; Mensele & Coetzee, 2019; Mitchell et al., 2001). Consequently, the study proposes a new conceptual framework: the LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning-Experiences-Feelings), which considers the role of structured learning opportunities, professional experiences, and the affective responses in shaping links, fit, and sacrifice.

### **Literature Review/Conceptual Framing**

#### **Orientation and Retention of Faculty Hires**

The orientation and retention of faculty in higher education is critical to institutional effectiveness and academic culture. Effective mentoring programs have emerged as a vital strategy to enhance faculty retention. Research indicates structured mentoring can lead to increased job satisfaction, productivity, and a sense of belonging. Studies have shown that mentoring programs tailored to the specific needs of faculty can significantly improve retention rates. For instance, Feldman et al. (2010) highlighted that traditional mentorship models often overlook the unique challenges faced by clinician-educator faculty, suggesting that targeted mentoring could enhance job satisfaction and productivity. Similarly, White et al. (2010) emphasized the importance of a well-matched mentor-protégé relationship, noting that mismatches can lead to lower retention rates among faculty. This aligns with findings from Er et al. (2011), who argued that specialized mentoring programs focusing on research and administrative skills are essential for developing early-career faculty members.

The presence of faculty development programs has been shown to positively influence academic settings. Guevara et al. (2013) reported that a significant number of schools in higher education have implemented mentoring and career development programs aimed at supporting faculty, which is crucial for the academic environment. The success of these programs was further supported by Beech et al. (2013) who found that mentoring initiatives specifically designed for faculty can lead to improved retention and career advancement. In addition to formal mentoring, the orientation process for new faculty is equally important. Effective onboarding programs that include mentorship components can significantly enhance the transition experience for new hires. For example, Hansbrough et al. (2023) emphasized the necessity of well-structured onboarding practices to foster teaching competence among new instructors. This is echoed by Phillips et al. (2016) who noted formal mentoring programs not only benefit mentees but also contribute to a positive institutional culture, thereby enhancing overall faculty retention.

Non-tenure track instructors represent a significant portion of the higher education workforce, particularly in colleges of education, and their training requires tailored programming to address unique challenges stemming from contingent status, differing role requirements and differing resource access (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011; Ginsberg, 2011; Lyke, 2019). Faculty development programs specifically for non-tenure earning instructors in higher education, colleges of education should be comprehensive, context-specific, emphasize pedagogical training, and support institutional integration. The literature base highlights the importance of addressing the unique challenges of contingent employment while providing professional growth and opportunities to engage in job embeddedness (Baldwin & Wawrzynski, 2011; Ginsberg, 2011; Lyke, 2019; Miller & Struve, 2020; Richardson et al., 2007).

The role of guidance in reducing stress and promoting professional development cannot be overstated. Metzger et al. (2013) argued that mentoring is integral to cultivating belonging within academic institutions, which ultimately benefits both the mentees and the institution. This orientation

and retention of faculty in higher education is significantly influenced by the implementation of effective mentoring and onboarding programs. Tailoring these initiatives to meet the diverse needs of faculty can lead to improved job satisfaction, productivity, and retention rates. As institutions continue to navigate the complexities of faculty development, prioritizing mentorship as a strategic tool will be essential for fostering a supportive and inclusive academic environment.

### **Onboarding Program**

Onboarding programs for faculty hires in higher education are critical for ensuring new faculty members are effectively integrated and prepared. These programs can significantly influence faculty retention, job satisfaction, and overall effectiveness in teaching and scholarship. A comprehensive onboarding process typically includes several key components: socialization into the academic culture, mentoring, and structured training addressing both andragogical skills and institutional expectations. Research indicates that effective onboarding programs enhance faculty members' sense of belonging and readiness for their roles. For instance, Masaracchia et al. (2024) highlighted the importance of a structured onboarding process that not only provides new hires with essential resources but also fosters a welcoming environment that encourages social integration within the institution. This aligns with findings showing that faculty who participate in structured onboarding processes are significantly more likely to remain in their positions long-term compared to those who do not (Baker & DiPiro, 2019). The integration of pre-employment onboarding activities can create a smoother transition, as it allows new hires to familiarize themselves with institutional culture and expectations before their start date (Baker & DiPiro, 2019).

Mentoring is another crucial aspect of effective onboarding programs. Young-Brice et al. (2022) emphasized that mentoring can significantly support newly hired faculty as they navigate their academic roles, providing guidance on teaching, scholarship, and service responsibilities. This sentiment is echoed by Hensel and Robinson (2016) who noted mentorship can help new faculty members develop the competencies necessary for success in their positions. Tarr (2010) indicated

this is true for non-tenure track faculty, but they have differing perspectives and demographics that should be considered. They may feel a separation from the opportunities available to full-time, tenure track faculty and need to be included, recognized and rewarded in like ways. Additionally, the role of peer support and collaboration in onboarding is underscored by the need for ongoing professional development opportunities that encourage faculty to engage with one another and share best practices (Shafi et al., 2020).

The design and implementation of onboarding programs should be informed by the specific needs of the faculty and institution. Salajegheh (2021) argued faculty development programs should be tailored to address the unique challenges faced by new hires, including skill development in teaching and curriculum design. This approach is supported by the findings of Dehghani et al. (2019) who emphasized the importance of aligning faculty development initiatives with institutional goals to enhance teaching effectiveness and faculty engagement. Well-structured onboarding programs incorporating mentoring, socialization, and tailored training are essential for the successful integration of new faculty. These programs not only improve retention rates but also foster a culture of collaboration and continuous professional development, ultimately enhancing the quality of education provided by the institution.

### **Developing a Community**

Developing a community for faculty hires in higher education necessitates a multifaceted approach. The recruitment and retention of faculty is critical for fostering an academic environment that benefits both faculty and students. Institutions must implement targeted recruitment strategies that attract candidates but also create a supportive environment that fosters their success. This includes establishing mentorship programs and networking opportunities specifically designed for new faculty groups (Duffy et al., 2024; Griffin et al., 2020). Retention of faculty is important, as high turnover rates can undermine initiatives. Factors such as negative departmental climate and lack of institutional support can lead to dissatisfaction among faculty (Sekaquaptewa et al., 2019; Vassie et

al., 2020). Creating a community involves not only hiring faculty but also fostering an environment where they feel valued and supported. This can be achieved through professional development opportunities, inclusive leadership practices, and regular assessments of departmental culture to identify needs (Davenport et al., 2022; Tillman, 2018).

### **Fit and Links to Community and Organization**

The integration of community and organizational links in faculty hiring processes within higher education is crucial for fostering retention. Research indicates that intentional examination of university culture can significantly impact the hiring of faculty. Community engagement in the recruitment process can help bridge gaps between institutions and new hires. Moreover, the challenges associated with integrating faculty into the academic community underscore the importance of socialization and support systems. Munene (2014) discussed how higher education necessitates not only the recruitment of skilled faculty but also the effective integration into the university's social fabric. This is echoed by Petersen et al. (2022) who noted faculty recruitment and retention strategies must be tailored to the unique contexts of different institutions, acknowledging that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective. Such tailored strategies can enhance the sense of belonging among faculty, which is critical for retention.

The role of organizational mechanisms in supporting faculty hires is further explored by Muñoz et al. (2017) who highlighted the importance of creating supportive environments for faculty structured in the hiring processes. This aligns with the findings of Sheridan et al. (2010) who emphasized that the faculty hiring process is a pivotal juncture in a faculty member's career, where institutional commitment can significantly influence outcomes. The work of Phillips and Kasztelnik (2021) illustrated that effective recruitment strategies must consider the work environment and relationships among faculty and students to foster a supportive academic community. The intersection of community engagement, organizational culture, and intentional hiring practices is vital for enhancing faculty retention in higher education. Institutions must assess their hiring

processes and implement strategies that foster support for faculty. By doing so, they can create an environment that benefits both faculty and students.

### **Connection and Embeddedness: Community and Organization Connected Sacrifice**

The concept of connected sacrifice within the context of faculty in higher education encompasses elements of job embeddedness, community ties, and the relational dynamics of sacrifice and self-care. Job embeddedness refers to the various factors that influence an individual's decision to remain in their position, which is particularly relevant for faculty members who often navigate complex organizational environments. Research indicates that job embeddedness is significantly influenced by community links, organizational fit, and normative commitment, which collectively enhance faculty retention in higher education institutions (Mensele & Coetzee, 2019). For instance, Mensele and Coetzee (2019) highlighted that organizational commitment and community links positively predict faculty's intention to stay, suggesting that a strong sense of belonging and connection to the institution is crucial for retention.

The interconnectedness of faculty and their communities is further illustrated by the work of Pippert et al. (2019) who discussed how relational processes, including sacrifice and self-care, shape the motivations of individuals within familial and community contexts. This relational dynamic is mirrored in academic settings, where faculty often sacrifice personal time and resources to benefit their students and the institution. The implications of connected sacrifice extend beyond individual faculty members to the broader academic community.

### **Theoretical Framework: JET**

JET, introduced by Mitchell and colleagues in 2001, involved examining ways to improve explanations of employee turnover while investigating why people choose to remain in their jobs. The model provides a theoretical lens through which to view embeddedness as opposed to employee attrition. The framework includes aspects both internal and external to the job. Mitchell et al.'s (2001) findings shifted away from attrition and toward three aspects of job embeddedness as they

apply to both community and organizational situations. Their results demonstrated how job embeddedness could predict retention and attrition beyond traditional metrics of job satisfaction, dedication, and availability. Mitchell et al.'s (2001) work provided a platform for JET to understand how to retain hires.

This theory proposed that workers become “embedded” in their jobs, including the connections in the following ways:

- (1) Links: connections to people and activities
- (2) Fit: immersion into the community and job
- (3) Sacrifice: consideration of what would be lost if they quit the job

JET will be applied to the research while examining the research question: What role does a supplemental onboarding program play in helping a batch hire of new faculty feel part of the department's academic community at a university?

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the experiences of newly hired faculty members participating in a supplemental onboarding process. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the focus on understanding participants' perceptions, reflections, and sense of belonging; all of which align with the goals of JET (Mitchell et al., 2001). Data collection, treatment design, participant demographics, and analytic procedures are described in the following subsections. Together, these components provide a transparent account of how the study was conducted and how the findings were derived.

#### **Treatment: Seminar Design**

The onboarding program was designed to support new faculty with professional development. When comparing to the JET design, the researchers found an intersection of sense of belonging goal (Mitchell et al., 2001). Throughout the seminar series, the JET components were found where participants could strengthen their links with colleagues, deepen their fit with the

department's culture and expectations, and immerse in experiences that would professionally and socially connect with the goals of the department. This approach balanced structured professional development with community building to help the new faculty with integration to the academic and professional culture.

The onboarding program was designed to meet the specific needs of the department at the time of program implementation. The intention was not to future-proof the hires or to ensure that any identifiable problem would be mitigated but to support faculty into the program as it existed at that time. Participants' needs were determined through informal consultation with departmental leadership and experienced faculty, with particular attention given to the challenges faced by instructors transitioning from K-12 to higher education. All participants were hired as either instructors or clinical faculty and shared similar, K-12 teaching backgrounds. Program leaders, in partnership with experienced faculty, modelled instructional and professional expectations through session facilitation that incorporated discussion, reflection, and practical application, demonstrating approaches to teaching, assessment, advising, and faculty engagement aligned with participants' instructional roles. While the topics were planned in advance, incorporating such topics as literacy fundamentals and mindfulness strategies, the sessions were also structured in such a way as to allow space for participant questions and emerging needs, which were permitted to shape future sessions. This allowed for participants to learn expectations for new faculty through observing enacted practice and engaging with experienced faculty.

Sessions were scheduled once a month on Fridays, a day traditionally used in the department for faculty meetings rather than live course instruction. This choice minimized scheduling conflicts and allowed the onboarding initiative to complement rather than compete with participants' teaching or clinical observations. Faculty who served as session leaders and mentors were selected collaboratively by the research team based on their interest in mentoring, their expertise aligned with session topics, and their relevance to participants' instructional roles. Each session included a

professional development focus and concluded with a group lunch, in which a few experienced faculty and staff were invited to join. These lunches gave new faculty the opportunity to develop collegial relationships, ask candid questions, and expand their professional networks.

### **Participants**

Participants consisted of seven newly hired members in the education department at a comprehensive university in Southcentral United States. All participants had been hired as part of a larger hiring initiative that brought in multiple new instructors simultaneously. Participation in both the onboarding program and the study was voluntary. The participants represented a mix of instructional ranks and disciplinary backgrounds within the field of teacher education, with the sole common factor being the role of a new hire.

Data were collected through a combination of open-ended written interview responses and semi-structured group interview discussions conducted at the conclusion of the participants' first academic year. The interview questions were designed to elicit reflections on participants' onboarding experiences, perceptions of departmental culture, areas of confidence, ongoing challenges, and suggestions for program improvement. Approval for the study was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board (IRB), and all participants elected to participate and provided informed consent. Here is a sampling of the first four of the 11 questions asked: (1) Can you describe your overall experience with the new instructor onboarding program? What aspects did you find most valuable? (2) How did the onboarding program contribute to your understanding of the STE department culture? (3) Reflecting on your participation in the onboarding activities, what specific skills or knowledge do you feel you have developed or improved? (4) Were there any areas within the onboarding program that you believe could be enhanced or expanded upon to better support new faculty members?

## Demographics

The seven participants in this study represented a group of newly hired faculty members who shared the common experience of beginning their careers in higher education within the same department, yet differed in age, degree attainment, and career trajectory. All participants identified as female. Their ages ranged from the 30s through the 60s, providing a mix of early-career and late-career perspectives within the cohort.

In terms of academic preparation, five participants held master's degrees and two held doctorates. All participants were hired into instructional or clinical faculty roles rather than tenure-eligible positions. Their primary responsibilities were teaching and supervising field experiences, which aligned with the department's focus on preparing future teachers. While the participants with doctorates brought advanced disciplinary expertise, their appointments were consistent with the instructional emphasis of this hiring cohort. Professional backgrounds also varied. All participants transitioned into higher education after extensive teaching experience in K–12 schools, while others had prior adjunct or instructional experience at the university level. This combination of experience levels brought different strengths, questions, and concerns.

## Qualitative Analysis

This study employed a qualitative research design to examine the experiences of newly hired faculty members participating in a supplemental onboarding process. A qualitative approach was selected to allow for in-depth exploration of participants' perceptions, emotions, and suggestions related to their onboarding experience (Patton, 2014). This methodology aligns with the goal of understanding how structured onboarding experiences influence faculty members' sense of belonging, professional development, and institutional fit (Mensele & Coetzee, 2019).

Thematic analysis was used to examine the qualitative data (Patton, 2014). The analytic process involved several stages. First, the researchers conducted independent open coding of the written responses and discussion transcripts to identify preliminary codes and emergent patterns. The

researchers then met to compare and reconcile codes, collaboratively developing a coding framework that organized participant quotations into related subthemes. The subthemes were consolidated into overarching themes that captured central elements of the onboarding experience, highlighting both strengths and opportunities for improvement. Thematic interpretation was guided by JET, centering on how participants' perceptions of fit; professional and social ties; and the perceived costs of leaving contributed to participants' embeddedness within the university. The Generative AI tool, Perplexity AI and Microsoft Copilot, were used to review and confirm the themes in connection to the theoretical framework, literature review, and discussion.

To ensure integrity, the researchers engaged in peer debriefing throughout the coding process, maintaining an audit trail of coding decisions and theme development. Analyses continued until thematic saturation was reached, with no new themes emerging from the data. When quoting, codes are given to the participants as "Participant #" and then also what question the information came from. All quoted participants have been given codes (e.g., Participant #) and the associated question has been noted (e.g., Q#). Participants were interviewed in person or by written response.

### **Connection to Theoretical Framework: Job Embeddedness Theory**

Data analysis was guided by JET, which posits that employee retention is influenced by the extent to which individuals perceive a strong fit with their organization, maintain meaningful links with others, and the perceived cost of severing ties with the organization (Mitchell et al., 2001). Applying this framework allowed the researchers to interpret how the onboarding program contributed to participants' embeddedness within the department and the broader university environment. The analysis will then connect to the dimensions of the JET using the following figure adapted from Mitchell et al. (2001). (See Figure 1).

**Figure 1***Job Embeddedness Theory Dimensions and Sample Items*

<b>Dimensions</b>	<b>Sample Items</b>
Fit to Community	“This community is a good match for me.”
Fit to Organization	“My job utilizes my skills and talents well.”
Links to Community	“How are you involved in local community organizations?”
Links to Organization	“How long have you worked for this institution?”
Community-Related Sacrifice	“Leaving this community would be very hard.”
Organization-Related Sacrifice	“My promotional opportunities are excellent here.”

*Note:* adapted from Mitchell et al. (2001)

### **Results**

Overall, the participants reflected on their experiences and their responses were coded and represented by the following themes and sub-themes gleaned from the qualitative analysis of the interviews:

- Theme 1: Positive Overall Experience
- Theme 2: Valuable Presentations
  - Sub-theme: Memorable Moments and Impactful Experiences
- Theme 3: Improvement in Skills and Knowledge
- Theme 4: Integration into the Academic Community
  - *Sub-theme: Networking and Building Connections*
  - Sub-theme: Understanding Department Culture
- Theme 5: Challenges, Suggestions for Improvement, and Ideas for Moving Forward

- Sub-theme: Need for Extended or Additional Sessions

### Connecting Supplemental Onboarding Experiences to JET

JET (Mitchell et al., 2001) explains why employees stay with their organization by focusing on three primary dimensions:

- Links: Formal or informal connections with people and groups in the organization.
- Fit: Perceived compatibility and comfort with the organization's culture, environment, and job requirements.
- Sacrifice: The perceived costs of leaving the organization, including both tangible and intangible benefits lost.

Along with each theme, we include how the findings highlight how the supplemental onboarding program connects to the JET.

#### Theme 1: Positive Overall Experience

Contributing to theme 1, most participants generally found the onboarding program to be informative, helpful, and an excellent way to build connections with new and current faculty members. Many highlighted their enjoyment of the presentations—led by faculty presenting in their teaching areas—and the networking opportunities, particularly the post-workshop lunches. One participant shared, *“The overall experience with the new instructor onboarding program was informative, helpful, and an excellent way to build connections with new and current faculty and staff at CEBS”* (Participant 6: Q1). Another agreed, *“This was a very enjoyable experience. I learned useful information from the presentations and met a variety of people in the STE program”* (Participant 7: Q1). Participant 1's comment demonstrated the experience was pleasant and helpful but also should be continued: *“This was a wonderful and helpful experience. My hope is the onboarding experience continues”* (Q11).

Showing the difference between support and onboarding in the K-12 setting, Participant 3 shared: *“...we don't get near the level of support coming from K-12 coming into this. And so I've*

*been just overwhelmed with, like you said, kindness, and...the generosity and the willingness to help.”*

Overall, theme 1 gave insight into how the participants felt supported by a positive experience and design of the onboarding initiative.

### **Theme 2: Valuable Presentations**

The presentations by various faculty members with established experience in the department were frequently mentioned as valuable. Participants appreciated learning about different teaching perspectives and departmental areas, which helped them understand who to approach for specific questions. Participant 2 shared how they appreciated getting to see veteran colleagues share their areas of expertise. Participant 7 also added as a response to Question 3: *“I was able to identify with all presentations and enjoyed all presenters.”* Participant 3 added about the value of the presentations helping to understand how the Department functions: *“Spending time chatting with long-term faculty members helped me to see who has taken on leadership roles within the department”* (Q2).

The sub-theme, Memorable Moments and Impactful Experiences, contributed to theme #2 as well. For this, participants shared memorable moments from the program that significantly impacted their teaching and academic responsibilities. For instance, advice like "take pictures" of classroom activities and specific presentations that led to immediate changes in their teaching practices were particularly impactful. One participant shared: *“Sometimes I learned a lot about the college or department political climate by riding in the back seat of cars and listening to conversations on the way to and from lunch”* (Q2).

The biggest takeaway for Theme 2 is that the presentations were impactful, and the participants had individual thoughts and gains that varied per person depending on their perspective.

### Theme 3: Improvement in Skills and Knowledge

For this theme, participants reported developing a broader knowledge base and improving specific skills, such as storytelling, mindfulness techniques in teaching, and creating effective rubrics. The program also provided useful information about administrative processes, such as annual performance reviews. Participant 3 shared how the onboarding provided exposure to different skills that could be developed:

*I got exposed to several ... new skills.... I think I just got exposed to lots of things that I had not had the chance to learn in my previous career in K-12. So, I think for me it was just a broadening of [my] knowledge base. (Q3)*

Participant 3 shared how she learned an advanced approach to a foundational skill for her in her teaching for an immediate use:

*When I came to the Rubrics workshop, I immediately went back and was like, I'm going to redo my rubrics and got an idea from that... immediate impact.*

Overall, theme 3 reveals how the participants felt the seminars were practical in skill and professional development growth. Participants mentioned how they grew in many facets, such as rubric development and teaching strategies.

### Theme 4: Integration into the Academic Community

The onboarding program played a crucial role in helping new faculty feel part of the academic community. The program's structure facilitated a smoother transition into new roles and fostered a sense of belonging within the department. For this theme, participants interviewed shared comments that led to this theme.

Participant 3 shared how the initiative reduced the feeling of a hierarchy and contributed to feelings of everyone being in a community together: *“Thanks to the onboarding program, I was able to view other faculty members as “regular” people with whom I did not need to feel intimidated.”*

***Sub-theme: Networking and Building Connections***

The sub-theme, Networking and Building Connections, contributed to this theme as well; participants shared remarks that led to this sub-theme. The program facilitated connections with colleagues, especially during lunches. This helped participants feel more integrated and less intimidated by senior faculty. The informal interactions during meals were particularly appreciated for dismantling barriers and fostering community. Participant 3 shared, “...*lunch part was good to also see people in their element.*”

***Sub-theme: Understanding Department Culture***

The onboarding program contributed significantly to participants' understanding of the department's culture with participants sharing comments connected to this sub-theme. By interacting with various faculty, participants gained insight into the department's structure, academic norms, and the roles of different faculty members. One participant shared, “...*which in turn, helped me to feel more connected to our department and my new life as a faculty member at [‘best university’]*” (Participant 7: Q1). Participant 2 shared how she was better able to understand the culture and make-up of the department and roles of the faculty (Q2). Another indicated how she better understood the culture and how it helped with her comfort level in interacting with colleagues. Participant 2 shared how she was thankful to interact with those that she does not work heavily with on a regular basis.

Overall, Theme 4 was powerful in that it also comprised two sub-themes. All these data showed most of the participants felt like they were being integrated into the department's community.

**Theme 5: Challenges of and Suggestions for Improvement and Ideas for Moving Forward**

While the overall feedback was positive, participants identified some areas for improvement in administrative processes, mentorship, and advising support. They felt they needed more ongoing support and clearer information about administrative tasks and procedures. One participant shared about how the presentations were great but mostly about instruction. This participant shared that

more of a focus on answering questions would have been timelier for a first-year person. Another participant noted how it would be helpful to understand the procedures of the department and mentoring needed (Participant 1: Q4). Showing the need for mentorship, another participant shared, *“The only improvement I might suggest is assigning designated mentors for new faculty members”* (Participant 7: Q4). Participant 3 added about how opportunities to ask questions throughout the year would be helpful to support the new instructors: *“I had lots of questions about things that I wanted to ask at those sessions, but they were already kind of structured for us, so I didn't feel like that was the right place...”*

Advising support through coaching and mentoring was a common suggestion to include in the onboarding sessions. Many new faculty members struggled with advising responsibilities and suggested more structured support, such as dedicated advising sessions or assigned advising partners. Participant 4 recommended modelling the advising process. Participant 2 noted advising challenges and said the reality of finding an advising buddy is not as helpful as the idea of it. They suggested assigning a person to help answer questions. This echoed a call for a more structured mentorship program for new faculty, especially those not on the tenure track. Some participants noted that assigned mentors did not always engage with them, highlighting a gap in support.

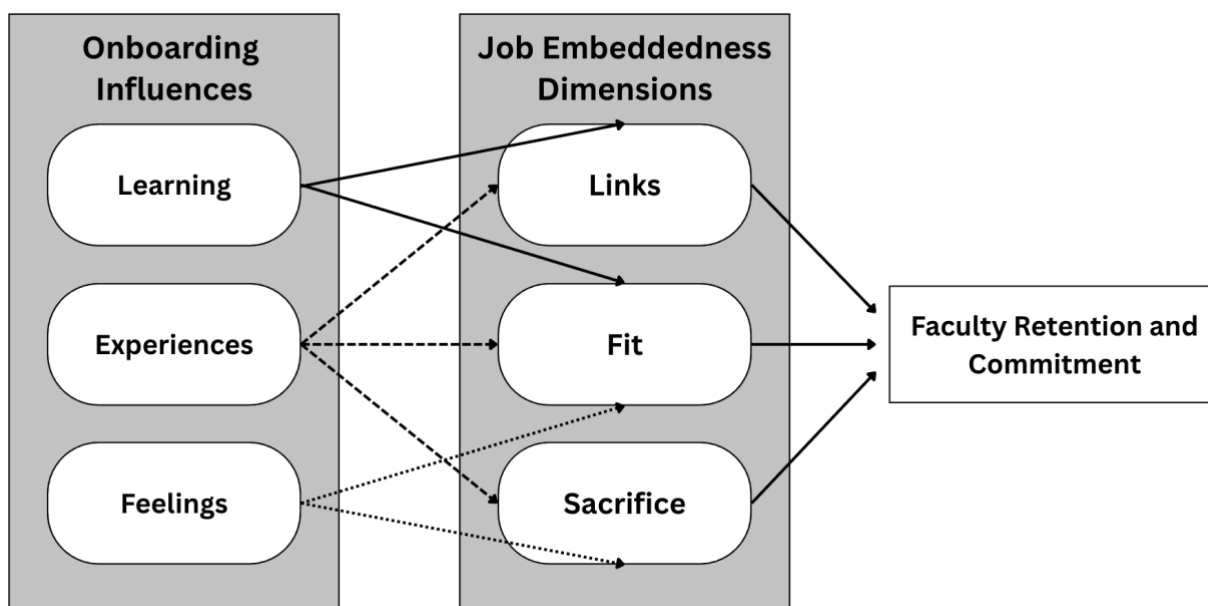
In summary, Theme 5 provides insight into ideas the participants had for improving the onboarding seminars. The focus included expanding on the aspects of how to do the day-in and day-out parts of the job. They mentioned how mentoring would have been a big help and how extra support for learning how to advise was such a great need.

### **Discussion**

The new instructor onboarding initiative was implemented with this central research question: What role does a supplemental onboarding program play in helping a batch hire of new faculty feel part of the department's academic community at a university?

### **New Visual Model: Onboarding Influences Connected to JET Dimensions**

To illustrate how the findings connect to the JET (Mitchell et al., 2001) dimensions, a modified visual was created: The LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings) (see Figure 2), which considers three influences in New Faculty Onboarding and how they connect to the three dimensions of JET: 1) *learning* (links and fit); 2) *experiences* (links, fit, and sacrifice) and 3) *feelings* (fit and sacrifice). Through their learning, participants were able to build links through shared training experiences, locating and connecting to on-campus support, and mentorship. The learned experiences in the onboarding process enhanced participants' fit with the organizational community by clarifying their roles and helping them conceptualize and align with expectations and organizational culture. The experiences associated with training, including social interactions, participation in formal and informal gatherings and networking, helped participants construct links in the form of collegial bonds, integrating the new faculty with established faculty. The experiences allowed them to adapt to the organizational culture, which would impact how they fit in the department. Increasing investments into the organizational culture and community would increase the sacrifice one would have to make to leave the institution. As the new participants processed and shared their feelings on the onboarding, their sense of belonging and connection to the team emerged, demonstrating an enhanced organizational fit. Once this fit is developed, the emotional cost in the form of lost training and support would lead to a greater sense of sacrifice if one were to consider leaving the institution. Onboarding processes that tap into the fits-links-sacrifice triad of job embeddedness through learning opportunities, experiences, and opportunities for participants to reflect on their feelings may see the outcomes of new faculty retention and commitment.

**Figure 2***The LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings)***Evidence and Literature Alignment*****Alignment with Existing Literature, Job Embeddedness Theory, and New Conceptual Framework******Components***

As noted in the literature, onboarding provides support and increases a sense of belonging among new employees, including new faculty members in an academic context (Baker & DePiro, 2019). These patterns can improve employee retention rates, especially if faculty express positive feelings about the onboarding process and report valuable experiences that lead to an increase in their investment in the organization. What they learn as a part of the training may increase their confidence and competence, reinforcing the three dimensions of embeddedness. These findings reinforce the importance of a departmental onboarding program with the goals of further integrating and retaining new faculty. The following analysis triangulates the researcher-identified themes from the data with the dimensions of Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), and existing literature. Further, it contributes a new conceptual framework with components of *learning*, *experiences*, and *feelings*: LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings).

### ***Strengthening Links within the Department***

Participants in this study were full-time, non-tenure-eligible instructional and clinical faculty, a population for whom early professional integration and collegial relationships may play an especially important role in shaping belonging. Viewed in this context, the links formed through the onboarding program represent a meaningful mechanism for fostering connection and fit during the first year. Participants reported the experience as a primary determinant of forging important relationships with their colleagues. Most described the informative and helpful nature of the program, and they communicated that through the program they were able to establish connections with both new and established faculty. Both formal and informal gatherings provided opportunities for participants to establish connections (or links). The regular interactions had the subsequent effect of essentially flattening certain hierarchies between senior- and junior-level faculty, making the former more approachable and supportive to the latter. These findings support how the Job Embeddedness Theory centralizes and prioritizes the quantity and quality of connections in the workplace as a mechanism for improving retention as well as employee embeddedness. Baker and DePiro (2019) concluded similar findings in their implementation of a structured onboarding process in a school of pharmacy. Young-Brice et al. (2022) additionally noted the importance of social links to a department especially during times of faculty shortages.

### ***Enhancing Perceived Fit with the Academic Community***

The evaluated onboarding program contributed to new faculty members' sense of fit within a department, as it reinforced connections between new faculty and existing departmental culture. Many participants reported that formal presentations from faculty were valuable, indicating the sessions broadened and increased their awareness of the areas of the department, the norms and mores of the university, and teaching approaches and philosophies. These presentations provided opportunities for faculty to appraise and refine their fitness within the department's values and expectations. This compatibility with the organization is detailed in Job Embeddedness Theory, as fit

contributes to employee retention and embeddedness (Mitchell et al., 2001). Further, participants reported an improvement to their knowledge of administrative processes and pedagogical skills; the increase in skill and knowledge connects with a sense of efficacy and confidence related to one's ability to be successful in a new role and, in time, will increase one's perception of fitness within a department. These conclusions align with findings by both Masaracchia et al. (2024) and Caldwell and Rutledge (2023) inasmuch as they show how faculty preparedness, knowledge of role, and sense of belonging are positively impacted by a structured onboarding process that supports career readiness.

### ***Building Sacrifice through Investment and Belonging***

The more a faculty member is embedded in departmental networks and culture, and the more they associate with the academic environment, the more likely they will feel they are sacrificing something if they leave the institution. The participants discussed how the onboarding program connected them with people and processes. While they did not directly discuss sacrifice, they communicated the degree to which they valued being apprised of institution- and departmental-specific processes and forging professional connections. Consequently, if they were to leave the institution, they would be forgoing these resources and knowledge, and the loss would represent socio-psychological and pragmatic costs. This perceived sacrifice is noted not only in Job Embeddedness Theory (Mitchell et al., 2001), but also in other theories of employee retention that note how the emotional and financial costs of turnover decisions inform employee decisions (Bowers et al., 2023). Important to the broader institution, significant financial costs are associated with faculty turnover and have been noted in existing literature, showing the link between embeddedness and an organization's budget (Pappas et al., 2022).

### ***Addressing Challenges to Maximize Embeddedness***

While the feedback was positive overall, participants noted several areas of improvement; namely, needs related to ongoing support for and knowledge of administrative processes,

mentorship, and advising. The existing mentor program, as participants noted, was limited to tenure-eligible faculty and support for advising responsibilities was also said to need improvement, which may indicate an area of vulnerability in the onboarding experience. These areas of improvement may weaken links to the organization and prevent or hinder a faculty member's sense of belonging, as these components relate to JET, and maintaining the status quo has the potential of impacting faculty retention. Expanding the mentor program, providing more opportunities for faculty to familiarize themselves with administrative processes, and implementing more advising support could individually or collectively improve embeddedness. These findings are supported in prior research that indicates mentorship and ongoing support contribute to faculty integration and retention (Baker & DiPiro, 2019; Ramasamy & Abdullah, 2017).

### **Limitations**

The study may be perceived as limited by sample size, context, participation bias, self-reported data, short-term focus, and a lack of comparative non-participants. The study was conducted in a single department at a regional university; therefore, the results may be informed by an organizational culture that may not be transferable to other departments or institutions. Because the participants self-selected to be interviewed, they may have had stronger positive or negative opinions or participation, which could have skewed results. Relatedly, the data are self-reported, relying on potentially biased faulty recollections. The study is limited to one onboarding program, implemented over the course of a year and evaluated after its completion. In addition, this study did not examine structural employment factors such as contract length, compensation, union representation, or workload outside the institution, all of which may influence retention and belonging for non-tenure-earning faculty. The focus of the study was instead on participants' experiences of onboarding, professional integration, and perceived embeddedness within the department. Another possible limitation is that only the treatment participants were interviewed. Non-participants were not part of the research and thus, we did not have a control group. Future

studies may address these limitations by expanding sample size and including comparative or longitudinal data, as well as increasing generalizability by including quantitative representation of outcomes.

### **Implications for Practice and Future Research**

For smaller groups of hires, leaders should consider how to design a smaller scope for how to reach the needs of the individuals without a critical mass of individuals forming the community. This initiative was implemented due to many new instructor hires. It would have had a different feel and impact if fewer people had been involved, as the community of new people would have been smaller. Leaders should consider how to approach modifications when the number is smaller and how to balance the number of personnel needed to balance the labor/time and financial demands.

Further research could be done to refine the seminar design to share the most pertinent features needed for onboarding participants to gain the most in the process. Much of the design approached how to support the new instructors in their understanding of andragogy and strategies/ideas for improving instruction. In considering the participants' responses to the question about how to improve the seminars to support more of the job procedures and the rationale for structure and the work, we found additional ideas for streamlining the practicality and foundational design of the seminars to address more common needs. As all participants came from the K-12 environment, the support structure could be improved to focus on their journey to becoming comfortable in the university environment.

A possible outcome of the research would also be a streamlined and transferable design for the seminar series. With this thoughtful approach, the seminars would have the potential for being replicated at other institutions with a connection to good onboarding practices that would be more universal versus specific to this institution's nuances and expertise of the facilitators. In addition to a sharable set of seminars, a handbook for facilitators and productive reflective tasks would be designed to accompany the seminar series as a portable package to positively impact the process.

Another consideration is to investigate the use of an established survey partnered with the seminar design that could measure other aspects in a quantitative angle to the existing qualitative approach. For example, the 40-item survey designed by Mitchell et al. (2001) would enhance the interviewing design. A possible consideration would be to consider the Crossley et al. (2007) shortened design of seven item survey as a consideration as well. The items would be carefully examined for appropriateness considering the newly emerging LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings).

### **Conclusion**

This study explores the impact of a supplemental onboarding program on new, full time, non-tenure-eligible faculty integration within a university's education department, applying Job Embeddedness Theory as a guiding framework. The results demonstrated the efficacy of an onboarding training program and how a successful onboarding can create embeddedness in the form of fit, links, and a sense of sacrifice, which have the potential to reduce faculty attrition. This research further contributes to the field in the form of an additional layer of the conceptual framework of Job Embeddedness Theory, providing an emerging conceptual model, LEF Embeddedness Model (Learning–Experiences–Feelings), that interacts with the JET dimensions of fit, links, and sacrifice (Mitchell et al., 2001).

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