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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, SAN DIEGO  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN MARCOS

Black Staff Engagement at a Major Research University  
in Relation to Strategic Planning, Innovation, and Collaboration

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the  
requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

in

Educational Leadership

by

LaWana N. Richmond

Committee in charge:

University of California, San Diego

Professor Frances Contreras, Chair  
Professor Alan Daly

California State University of California, San Marcos

Professor Jennifer Jeffries

2015

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The Dissertation of LaWana N. Richmond is approved, and it is acceptable in quality and form for publication on microfilm and electronically:

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Chair

University of California, San Diego  
California State University, San Marcos

2015

## **DEDICATION**

This dissertation is dedicated to my grandmothers. They both taught me the value of tenacity and perseverance. I am who I am largely because of them.

## EPIGRAPH

“Failing to plan is planning to fail.” ~ Benjamin Franklin

“Best laid schemes of mice and men often go awry.” ~ Robert Burns

“[Strategy times Execution] multiplied by Trust equals Results)” ~Stephen M.R. Covey

“The shift into community is often quite sudden and dramatic. The change is palpable. A spirit of peace pervades the room. There is "more silence, yet more of worth gets said. It is like music. The people work together with an exquisite sense of timing, as if they were a finely tuned orchestra under the direction of an invisible celestial conductor.”

~ M. Scott Peck

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Jason Rather, thank you for your love and support throughout this process.

## VITA

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- 2001 Community Technology Coordinator, San Diego Urban League
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## **ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION**

Black Staff Engagement at a Major Research University in Relation to Strategic  
Planning, Innovation, and Collaboration

by

LaWana N. Richmond

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

University of California, San Diego, 2015

California State University, San Marcos, 2015

Professor Frances Contreras, Chair

Today's public research university is constantly required to respond to financial, regulatory, technological, political, social, and academic pressures. Frequently, the response is to initiate strategic planning and innovation efforts. The success of those efforts rely largely upon execution which is dependent upon staff at every level of the organization. This qualitative phenomenological study used appreciative inquiry as its method of inquiry as well as its analytical lens to explore the experiences of Black staff in various roles at a primarily non-Black public R1 research university. Participants were actively involved in the execution of plans developed to address various areas and objectives, but not very involved in the process of providing input for inclusion in any of the plans. Leadership and supervision are critical influencers of drivers as well as drivers of staff engagement.

## **CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

If change is truly constant, then it stands to reason that organizations level of commitment to employee engagements should be as well. The people working for an organization are at the heart of effective response to any call for change. People are far less likely to help participate in planning or support implementation of strategic initiatives when they have an anemic or nonexistent level of engagement as employees (Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010). Employee engagement is all about the relationship between an individual and the organization for which they work (Mirvis, 2012; Tomlinson, 2010). It is not about being warm and happy or agreeing with everything the organization says or does. It is about being committed to seeing the relationship through and trusting that even when they disagree, they trust and value the relationship they have with their employer (Welch, 2011).

Employee engagement is a measure of how connected, committed, and vested an employee is in their relationship to their employer (Millar, 2012; Welch, 2011). Highly engaged employees are more likely to go above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the organization's success (Smith & Cantrell, 2011; Tomlinson, 2010). According to the Dale Carnegie Institute (DCI), increased employee engagement is driven by positive emotions in regard to empowerment, enthusiasm, confidence, inspiration, and value (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012). In other words, if an employee feels valued, empowered, enthusiastic, confident, and inspired by an organization, they are more likely to have a high level of engagement with that organization.

Employee engagement is particularly important when organizations face threats and have to find opportunities in challenging times. Within the educational arena,

changing state, local, and federal regulations continuously increase the administrative costs of compliance management, students have are constantly demanding and better technologies and facilities, and funding sources have become increasingly inconsistent (Burdman, 2009; Doyle & Delany, 2009; Jackson, Helms, Jackson, & Gum, 2011; Zing, 2010). Different business models, new technologies, and changing global demographics are also contributing to a tension that demands a response (Stern, 2013; Zing, 2010). For many colleges and universities, that response has been to develop a strategic plan (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Mudrick, Steiner, & Pollard, 1992; Staley, Seaman, & Theodore-Shusta, 2012). In order to respond effectively to internal and external forces, strategic planning is more than just a good idea. While the concept of strategic planning in higher education has been around for decades, it has become critical based on current and projected internal and external forces (Kotler & Murphy, 1981; Lozier & Chittipeddi, 1986; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012).

Strategic planning efforts in higher education tend to be more effective when stakeholders throughout the organization are involved in developing the strategy and planning the execution (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). Senior leadership visions are often misinterpreted or poorly executed when the involvement of staff from various organizational areas is overlooked (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). In a study of strategic planning processes at three universities in Ghana, one of the findings was that staff perceived strategic plans as the responsibility of top management, so they took little or no ownership of actions to support successful implementation. At Brigham Young University in Idaho, staff from departments throughout the organization were involved heavily in the strategic planning process so

they took ownership of seeing them successfully implemented (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Unless internal and external factors are static, strategic plans tend to lead to organizational change. Effective change is highly dependent upon employee engagement (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Francesca Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Kinser, 1996; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). Perceived ability to influence change is a factor in employee engagement. Strategic planning is a coordinated approach to planning future actions in an organization or business to meet its objectives (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Oster, 1999).

“A strategy is a plan to get us from here to there” (Oster, 1999) and the mission, vision, goals, objectives, and/or values define what “there” is. They are usually large scale activities that shape the direction of an organization with a focus on developing ways of solving existing problems, preventing or mitigating the impact of foreseeable threats as well as leveraging existing and anticipated opportunities (Dooris, Kelley, & Trainer, 2004; Paris, 2003).

Strategic planning processes can take many forms and be approached in many ways. Strategic planning processes typically involve several man hours of top executive time as well as leaders in middle management, highly paid consultants or consulting firms, as well as space, supplies and other resources (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Fathi & Wilson, 2009). With the amount of resources typically involved in strategic plans for large organizations, the planning process is vitally important.

Employee engagement in the strategic planning process can help with buy-in later when it's time to implement the plans (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). It can also help to make



sure things not readily apparent from the leader's perspective have the opportunity to be factored into the plans (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). People have been identified as the gatekeepers to change, so efforts to connect them to the organization, its goals, and its plans can be an effective change management strategy (Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). While the success of strategic planning processes is linked to numerous factors, employee engagement is frequently referred to as critical, particularly when the plan calls for significant change. With the exception of plans that call for maintaining the status quo, strategic plans tend to involve major change throughout an organization or entity. Some processes are more inclusive than others (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). Employee engagement has also been positively correlated with employee learning (Mirvis, 2012).

The manner in which organizational stakeholders engage heavily influences planning outcomes (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Tomlinson, 2010). The people with boots on the ground are typically the ones responsible for successful implementation of strategic plans, so engaging them in the planning process is also important (Tomlinson, 2010). In the case of strategic planning processes, it stands to reason that a more engaged employee will be more vested in the success of the organization and as such more committed to the success of the strategic planning process. Employee perceptions of their abilities to influence a change process factor into their level of engagement towards as well as their withdrawal away from the process (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010). When employees do not feel they have the ability to influence changes, they often shift into threat appraisal mode and start exploring their options.

### **Statement of the Problem**

With higher education currently in a state of flux, strategic planning has become a common response (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Strategic plans usually involve a large investment of the organization's resource and are often not successfully implemented (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012). The people in an organization have been identified as the most common source of failure of any change effort (Millar, 2012; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Tomlinson, 2010). Researchers have identified positive correlations between employee engagement and employee performance (Little & Little, 2006; Millar, 2012). It seems like employee engagement could be considered a critical success factor in any strategic planning effort. To that end, understanding employee perceptions can inform actions to support higher employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Wernal, Karel, Jan & Wait, 2011).

Employee engagement surveys deployed in higher education have revealed opportunities for improvement (Towers Watson, 2012). Staff members at the organizations surveyed have expressed unfavorable perceptions of the way the leadership of their organization communicates with them when it comes to change. They have also expressed unfavorable perceptions in regards to the way changes are executed (Towers Watson, 2012).

Since leaders have to develop strategic plans absent complete and perfect information about what is going to happen in the future, being able to quickly communicate with and coordinate people is critical (Mercer, 1991; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Oster, 1999). Aside from economic conditions, the outcomes experienced by an organization can be directly tied to the quality of their strategic planning processes (Fathi

& Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). Part of the success of planning and implementation is based on who is involved in each of these processes (Bryson & Berry, 2010). The criticality of getting people to quickly buy in, learn, and implement speaks to the fit of applied critical leadership and the importance organizational learning when planning strategically.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to examine Black staff's experience engaging in a strategic planning as part of understanding their engagement as employees at the university. The researcher's interest was in gaining an understanding of the experiences of participants in a strategic planning initiative at a public research university with consideration of campus climate and as a dimension of employee engagement. Stakeholder engagement and support of the implementation are critical to the success of any strategic planning initiative, so understanding these interactions is critical. Further, employee engagement has a tremendous impact on overall employee morale as well as productivity.

The researcher explored experiences Black staff at a majority non-Black public research university had engaging in its then recent strategic planning process. While most research focuses on the plans and actions of leaders, this study primarily focused on the perspective of one of the smallest subpopulations of people being led. Focusing on the experience of one of the smallest demographic groups in terms of staff on the campus (~3%) means looking at the group that is least likely to perceive themselves as having influence in any organizational process.

## **Research Questions**

The researcher had two questions: How do Black staff members engage in a strategic planning process? What are some elements that positively impact their engagement? The researcher examined self-reported data about employee experiences acquired through one on one interviews conducted by the researcher and analyzed for common themes. The researcher looked for commonalities in terms of which factors employees indicated as drivers for their engagement. One of the goals was to understand how institutions can better engage underrepresented staff in strategic planning processes and what actions can impact this particular group of stakeholder's (employees') engagement overall. The study looked at how inclusive a strategic planning process was perceived to be in terms of equity, diversity, inclusion, access and persistence, as well as addressing issues within the campus climate. The desired outcome of the project was to develop recommendations for strategies that may improve Black staff engagement at a research university and thereby positively influencing an aspect of campus climate.

## **Research Methodology**

This study was primarily qualitative and phenomenological using Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as its method of inquiry as well as analytical framework. The researcher integrated the use of some secondary qualitative and quantitative data as a means of guiding the study to inform decisions about study questions. One of the secondary data sets was the findings from a system wide survey which sampled policy covered staff at each of the campuses in a California university system. The other secondary data set was from a population survey of all faculty, staff, and students throughout the same university system, which asked questions relating to campus climate. Additionally, the researcher

leveraged access to exit interview verbatim data to gain insight through comments made by Black staff who felt the liberation to speak freely about their employment experience since they were leaving the institution.

The researcher recruited individuals at the study site to participate in the study by issuing an emailed invitation to participate through the office of Staff Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Opportunity. The participants were all present at this public research university during their then recent campus strategic planning process. The study sample included a few leaders as well as “rank and file” employees for response comparison in relation to positionality.

The purpose of the interviews was to get staff to discuss their participation in the strategic planning process as well as some general impressions from them in relation to their employment with the institution. This particular context was selected because the process has been described as inclusive with invitations to participate being issued to the entire staff population through several communication channels.

### **Limitations**

The data collected is limited in scope and asks respondents to discuss strategic planning experiences that had happened over the course of the prior year and a half. More recent experiences were likely to have colored their impressions and interpretation of past events. Further, staff members seemed to temper their responses based on fear associated with disclosing information that could potentially make them identifiable and subject to retaliation for “unacceptable” responses.

With the researcher being a member of the participant population, positionality may have had an impact on how participants responded during interviews. Depending

upon how they perceive relative status at the time, they may not have been as forthcoming as they might have been with an outside neutral party. Further, the number of participants interviewed was very limited and made it difficult to generalize the findings.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study is important because strategic planning like all change efforts are dependent upon staff engagement (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). Understanding how people engage in these processes is a step in learning how to increase their feelings of engagement and thus likelihood to meaningfully buy into the process.

While research has been done on strategic planning in higher education as well as employee engagement in higher education, little or no research focuses specifically on staff and how they perceive their experience and connection with the process, policy, or practice at public research university at which they are employed. While students and faculty are recognized consumers and producers of products and services in colleges and universities, the staff members who are responsible for shaping and driving the machine are at best, undervalued stakeholders. Consequently, plans are in those instances developed by people who do not have their boots on the ground and without the benefit of the knowledge or buy in of the people truly responsible for bringing them to fruition (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012).

One unique factor in this study is the use of Appreciative Inquiry as a theoretical framework as well as method of inquiry. Further, the use of AI in this study takes participants from focusing their energy on the things they don't like to a focus on

recalling and envisioning elements that can build on or create positive connection with their organization (Keers, 2007). Hence, AI lends itself to improvements in employee engagement, productivity, and innovation

## **CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE**

### **Introduction**

“People are the gatekeepers to change” (Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). That statement was true in the 90’s and continues to be at the center of strategic planning, change management, and innovation efforts today (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Employee engagement is a way of looking at the relationship employees have with their workplace and has been tied closely to productivity and willingness to go above and beyond the minimum in ways that include positive response to change (Little & Little, 2006; Millar, 2012; Welch, 2011). Employee engagement has many definitions, but it is consistently presented as having a positive correlation with employee performance and innovation (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012; Mirvis, 2012). According to the Gallup Organization, engaged employees perform at a measurably higher level than employees who are not engaged or actively disengaged (O’Boyle & Harter, 2013).

Many environmental factors are contributing to the urgency of the call for change and strategic planning for postsecondary institutions. One of those factors is the call to better leverage technology in and out of the classroom. The higher education industry has historically been composed of brick and mortar nonprofit institutions. The recent emergence of Massive Online Open Courses (MOOCs) has shown the potential for online education business models with offerings from popular Ivy League institutions like Stanford and Harvard as well as emerging nonprofits like Western Governors University and private for-profit institutions like University of Phoenix (Meyer, 2008).

Today’s students are accustomed to being able to get information and conduct transactions in real time through their mobile devices. Consequently, they are demanding



more robust technologies for student services as well as coursework (Gabriel, Campbell, Wiebe, MacDonald, & McAuley, 2012; Jackson, Helms, Jackson, & Gum, 2011).

Other external influences on education include state and federal budget cuts, new regulations, changing donor priorities and interests, and changes in the dynamics of the labor market (Zing, 2010). While funding has decreased, the regulatory and compliance load associated with receiving funding from the local, state and federal government agencies has steadily increased (Duncombe & Yinger, 2011).

Consequently, strategic planning is not just for big business (W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997). Higher education institutions are engaging consulting firms to support massive enterprise wide strategic planning efforts (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Kotler & Murphy, 1981; Mudrick, Steiner, & Pollard, 1992). The potential for gains is tremendous, but the process is a driving factor in the success of these types of initiatives (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Staley, Seaman, & Theodore-Shusta., 2012).

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) as a method of inquiry and study framework taps into the zeitgeist an appreciative approach has been known to cause. AI is known for being in itself an impetus for positive change because of its ability to inspire people toward positive change and innovative behaviors merely by asking questions that prompt individuals to think in those directions

### **Strategic Planning**

In this era of constant change, organizations in every sector are faced with an imperative to innovate and plan strategically (Bryson & Berry, 2010). Higher education institutions are no exception and have found themselves in the position of having to

retool themselves in response to internal and external factors (Burdman, 2009; Piland, 2004; Stern, 2013). These factors are in the form of threats as well as opportunities which external as well as internal to the individual institutions and the education industry (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012). Changes in funding, employer expectations, student expectations, technology, and even business models make strategic planning initiatives more common in higher education (Doyle & Delany, 2009; Jackson, Helms, Jackson, & Gum, 2011; Stern, 2013; Zing, 2010).

Strategic planning is not new to the higher education arena, but it seems like the imperative for change is much stronger today than it was fifty plus years ago, during the development of California's Master Plan for Higher Education (Burdman, 2009; Mellander, 2012; Zing, 2010). The pressures to change are coming from stakeholders as well as external forces. In an age of people questioning the value of a formal postsecondary education, colleges and universities are looking for innovative ways to demonstrate their value to students as well as potential donors and the general public (Norwood & Henneberry, 2006; Schneider, 2013).

For all these reasons and more, it becomes increasingly important for colleges and universities to plan strategically to ensure their continued viability and success (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fathi & Wilson, 2009). Universities need to plan strategically in order to develop a framework that aids purposeful decision-making processes and reduces the likelihood of merely being reactionary (Heifetz, 1994; Morgan, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). With the environment changing so rapidly, it is probably good to have a strategic plan to guide decisions in a way that reduces their politicization (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010). The presence of a plan makes it easier

to mitigate the influence of special interest groups and agendas when hard choices need to be made (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

### **Employee Engagement**

While the presence of a plan is great, it means very little if it is not developed or implemented properly (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). The failure or success of strategic planning initiatives has been tied closely to the human element (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). While strategic planning initiatives are often hailed as inclusive processes, staff engagement is a factor in how actively rank and file employees participate (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Millar, 2012).

### **Conceptual Framework and Literature Review**

The literature reviewed for this study defines employee engagement, describes strategic planning, touches on pressures driving the increase in strategic planning in general as well as in higher education, highlights the importance of employee engagement in relation to strategic planning, defines appreciative inquiry and details the relevance of appreciative inquiry as a lens for this study.

For the purpose of this study, a strategic planning initiative serves as a sandbox within which employee engagement takes place. It is used as point of reference around which questions related to engagement are asked. While employee engagement is important whether or not an organization is undertaking a strategic planning effort, employee engagement is particularly sought during these types of efforts.

At the same time, employee engagement is viewed as a key performance indicator for the success of strategic planning and innovation efforts. Strategic planning, employee

engagement, collaboration, and innovation relate to each other in the sense that within the context of strategic planning, employee engagement turns the wheels of collaboration and innovation as illustrated in Figure 1. It stands to reason that if strategic planning is supposed to be a collaborative process, then engagement in the process involves collaboration and if engagement is predecessor of strategic planning success then strategic planning success is predicated upon successfully engaging employees in collaborative efforts.

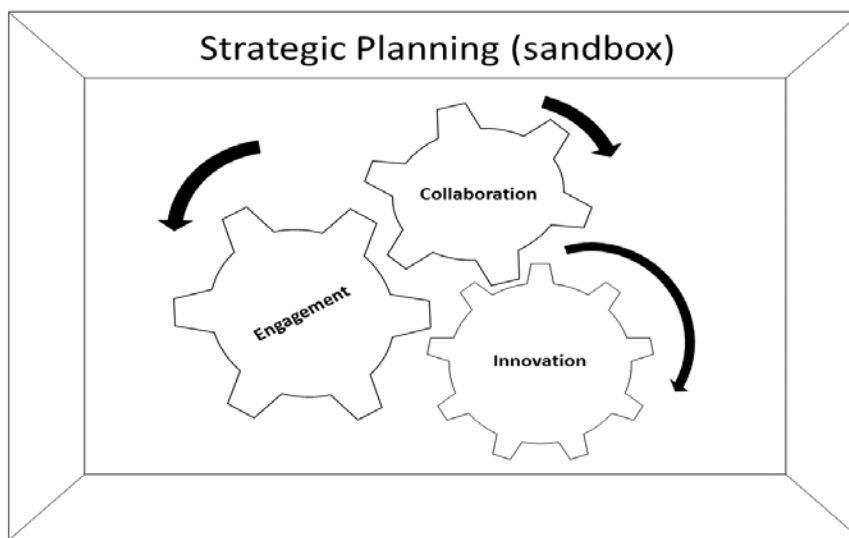


Figure 1. Conceptual framework

### **Employee Engagement**

Employee engagement is important within the context of strategic planning because implementation is as important as if not more important than the process of planning (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). According to Kriegel and Brandt's *Strategic Cows Make the Best Burges*, "People are the gatekeepers to change" or in other words, employees can slow, prevent, or sabotage change efforts (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012).

Employee engagement is a way of looking at the relationship employees have

with their workplace and has been tied closely to productivity and willingness to go above and beyond the minimum (Little & Little, 2006; Millar, 2012; Welch, 2011).

In a study of employee behaviors in a public sector community of practice in relation to innovation, the researchers discussed finding that employees who are disengaged opt out of contributing to innovation efforts (F Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010). This silence or lack of participation excludes the organization from fully realizing the benefit of employee collaboration and contribution to optimize the implementation of a change effort (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010; Kinser, 1996; Millar, 2012).

Table 1. Employee engagement category characteristics

Disengaged	Not Engaged	Engaged
Does minimum	Does “job”	Beyond “job”
Undermines change efforts	Doesn’t volunteer	Participates in Innovation
Impedes innovation		Collaborates Volunteers

Employee engagement is defined in many ways, but in general it is a reflection of the degree to which an employee is willing to subvert personal interests for the good of their organization (Little & Little, 2006; Millar, 2012; Tomlinson, 2010). Employee engagement has many definitions and dimensions, but it is consistently presented as having a positive correlation with employee performance (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012; Mirvis, 2012).

The dimensions of employee engagement are described as emotional, intellectual, and physical or behavioral (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Wernal, Karel, Jan & Wait, 2011). Several models of employee engagement cite meaningfulness, safety, and availability as the key dimensions of

employee engagement (Macey & Schneider, 2008; Welch, 2011).

According to Macey and Schneider (2008), employee engagement can be traits, states, or behaviors. Behavioral engagement is also extra-role behavior. It is about how an employee shows initiative and actively goes above and beyond their actual job or position. State engagement is about feelings of energy and absorption of energy. Examples include job satisfaction, commitment to organization and feelings of empowerment. Trait engagement is more about positive views of life and work, i.e. being proactive and conscientious.

Table 2. Dimensions of employee engagement

Trait (Perspective)	State (Feelings)	Behavioral (Actions)
Personality	Satisfaction	Volunteerism
Affect	Involvement	Initiative
Conscientiousness	Commitment	Adaptive
	Empowerment	Extra-role Behavior

(Macey & Schneider, 2008)

The Gallup Organization has done extensive research on employee engagement. They developed an instrument for use as an engagement measurement tool that has been utilized to measure the engagement levels of hundreds of thousands of people at organizations in a variety of industries throughout the private, public, non-profit, and for-profit sectors (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013). The Gallup Workplace Audit defines employee engagement as "the individual's involvement and satisfaction with as well as enthusiasm for work" (Macey & Schneider, 2008).

While employee engagement has been primarily of interest to human resource managers and researchers, it has strong implications for strategic planning and change management. With strategic plans and change efforts being tied so closely to the

commitment and performance of individuals, administrators and operational managers could benefit from factoring employee engagement into their leadership practice (Anonymous, 2005; Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Millar, 2012; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013).

The Employee Engagement Index measures employee engagement based on the Q<sup>12</sup> survey developed by the Gallup Organization is a measure of how much energy an employee is willing to give in support of organizational outcomes (Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010; Shuck & Reio, 2013). The Gallup Organization used this instrument in 199 separate studies to gather data from employees from 152 organizations in 44 industries throughout the public and private sector in 26 different countries to examine the relationship between employee engagement and performance, generalizability of that relationship and practical application for managers and executive (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009). By aggregating findings from multiple studies, they were able to look at results for nearly a million employees in more than 32,000 different business units. They arrived to the conclusion that a strong relationship exists between engagement and performance, this relationship is generalizable across business units, organizations, and industries, and that it is beneficial for managers to measure employee engagement as a key performance indicator. The University of California system contracted Towers and Watson to develop and administer a system wide engagement survey that was distributed to policy covered staff based on predetermined criteria for random but representative sampling

## **Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning is a structured process whereby organizations develop strategic plans to support their future success (Lozier & Chittipeddi, 1986; Mercer, 1991; Oster, 1999). It is also defined as a structured approach to preparing an organization to respond to an anticipated future in a way to help them reach their long term goals (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Paris, 2003). Strategic plans frequently include developing or clarifying an organization's mission, goals, and objectives as well as how to obtain them. While strategic planning is most commonly associated with for profit business concerns, it has recently become more common in education and other non-profit arenas (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Paris, 2003; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012).

Traditionally, these efforts have been the product of an organization's top leadership working together to develop plans that will be implemented from the top down (Fletcher, 2015; Mercer, 1991; Oster, 1999). In a recent magazine article in a trade publication for credit unions, strategic planning was discussed from a perspective of the value of using different approaches to strategic planning based on the needs of the organization (Fletcher, 2015). In addition to being top down, traditional strategic planning efforts take place annually, or biannually in isolation from the rest of the organization (Fletcher, 2015). The article provides as an example a credit union that integrates strategic planning as part of monthly board meeting with an eye towards being more responsive.

In the business sector, strategic planning is geared towards increasing profits and/or reducing costs (Mercer, 1991; Oster, 1999). The primary stakeholders in the business world are literally stakeholders in the sense that they have a financial stake in



the organization's future (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997; Fathi & Wilson, 2009). In the university setting, it is a "rigorous and critical brainstorming session used by university authorities to steer the affairs of the university" that helps prepare the university for the future (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Oster, 1999; Paris, 2003). The stakeholders in education are numerous and have priorities and agendas that are often at odds and this is a major differentiating factor when compared to planning in the traditional for-profit business sector (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004). Educational institutions worldwide are engaging in strategic planning initiatives to envision and plan for the future (Bell, 2013; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Paris, 2003).

Strategic planning in the non-profit and academic sectors differs significantly from strategic planning in the private and for-profit sectors. In her qualitative case study on strategic planning in the public sector, Melanie Paige Cohen cited the dependency of strategic planning in the public sector upon political agendas of the sitting administration (Cohen, 2006). She also asserted a distinction between strategy and planning with strategy being more of a long term endeavor and planning being short-term. According to her research, efforts labeled as strategic planning were often just planning sessions in that they did not focus on strategy (Cohen, 2006). William and Victoria Crittenden discussed how strategic planning differs in the non-profit sector (W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997). Social, political, and financial environment were each cited as driving

factors to undertake strategic planning efforts as well reasons the processes differ from those in the for profit or even governmental organization worlds.

Some universities plan strategically as a form of being proactive, but higher education strategic planning is more often conducted in response to some sort of threat (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Strategic planning initiatives at research universities typically involve hundreds of thousands of dollars in consulting fees and meeting logistics costs (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012).

A strategic plan's effectiveness is limited to the effectiveness of the implementation (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Paris, 2003). Implementation was identified through factor analysis as one of the key elements of strategic planning in nonprofit organizations (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000). In the same way that you are not a leader if nobody follows you, it is hard to call a plan strategic if it is not implemented effectively or in other words, followed.

The effectiveness or success of strategic planning initiatives is important for many reasons. Quite often, these efforts are undertaken in response to imminent threats to the institution's viability. Whether or not an immediate threat is present, strategic planning initiatives usually involve massive resource investments that the organization cannot afford to waste. From a leadership performance perspective, strategic planning initiatives are typically high profile, high stakes endeavors and failed efforts can be career killers (Oster, 1999). If you factor in the cost of the time of the frequently high salaries of the stakeholders at the table, the costs become even more substantial. These initiatives can also be high stakes because plan failure not only doesn't respond to the threat that served

as catalyst; matters are often made worse because of the waste or loss of resources invested in developing the failed plan.

A case study of a non-profit organization's approach to strategic planning discussed some of the barriers encountered as well as how they overcame them (Dahmus & Wooten, 2012). In the non-profit world, "strategic planning is a governance activity entrusted to nonprofit boards" (Dahmus & Wooten, 2012). Board members often lack the expertise to manage strategic planning processes, and in this case members bemoaned the fact that while they lacked the expertise to manage the process, they also didn't have the resources to engage an outside consultant. Another obstacle is the lack of preparation on the part of the board members. It was clear that many board members did not bother to read the pre-work materials that had been forwarded to them in hopes of having a running start. Another obstacle was the lack of strategic orientation. Many of the board members were more operational and tactical. They lacked the perspective necessary to think strategically.

Many institutions throughout the nation are engaging in campus wide and system wide strategic planning initiatives to help them shape the vision of their organizations in the future (Fathi & Wilson, 2009). The costs associated with these initiatives can run into the hundreds of thousands of dollars for some of the larger universities. With the large outlay of cash and other resources, good stewardship requires colleges and universities to make a concerted effort to have successful strategic planning and implementation efforts. Institutions can simply not afford to waste time, money, and other resources on half-hearted attempts to plan and implement.

Funding models for higher education are very different from what they had been

in the past (Doyle & Delany, 2009; Duncombe & Yinger, 2011; Stern, 2013). Contrary to the California Master Plan, education has taken some of the biggest hits during the economic slow-down in comparison to other budget areas (Burdman, 2009). Historically, education was last to be cut and first to be restored, but that is no longer the case (Doyle & Delany, 2009). Meanwhile, as resource availability decreases, student expectations in terms of access to information and technology as well as cost associated with meeting those expectations increase (Gabriel, Campbell, Wiebe, MacDonald, & McAuley, 2012; Jackson, Helms, Jackson, & Gum, 2011).

In California, the amount of state funding supporting postsecondary education has decreased every year (Burdman, 2009). For the California State University System, the amount of funding from the state has decreased from 2.25 billion to 1.6 billion since 2000 (Zing, 2010). The University of California and California Community College systems have experienced similar funding cuts. The changes in state funding have coincided with national and global economic downturns the past seven years (Clark, 2010). Public colleges and universities in the state of California have had to respond with layoffs and program cuts as well as aggressive initiatives to attract other types of funding.

In a quantitative review of budget cuts and “restorations” across four states over a fifty-year period, researchers found that while cuts were significant during economic downturns, the efforts to increase spending during more prosperous periods were consistently not sufficient to reach levels prior to the budget cuts (Doyle & Delany, 2009). What that means is per capita allocations for education are significantly less consistent or reliable today than they were in the 1950’s and 1960’s.

Aside from financial concerns, the academic landscape is changing with the

emergence of for-profit universities, free online courses from ivy leagues institutions, tuition free universities, and other models for postsecondary education (Kinser, 1996; Meyer, 2008; Schneider, 2013). With the iniquitousness of technology, student expectations are for higher level of information availability and automation as well as better technology in the classroom (Jackson, Helms, Jackson, & Gum, 2011).

Additionally, people are questioning the value of getting a college education (Norwood & Henneberry, 2006; Schneider, 2013). While the question has always been asked, it has become more prevalent in recent years (Culley, 1928; Schneider, 2013). In the past, the answer was strongly in favor of education with a clear correlation between income and level of education (Schneider, 2013). With so many students graduating with high debt and low job prospects, despite having completed a four-year degree, students often have no marketable skills to assist them in gaining employment (London, 2013).

It is likely that understanding the perspectives of people at different touch points in an institution can be helpful in creating a context for successful implementations (Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004). Strategic planning initiatives at top tier research universities usually involve a significant outlay of resources in a variety of forms which include consultant fees, costs of meeting logistics, and the value of the time contributed by stakeholders involved in the process of shaping the plan (Corrigan, Virginia, & Martin, 2004; Lawson & Kearns, 2009; Mirvis, 2012; Reynolds, 2009). With resources being scarce, it is important that these efforts bear fruit. Strategic planning initiatives in recent years are undertaken in response to threats to the institutions continued viability and effectiveness, as well as a means of addressing funding shortfalls (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Lozier & Chittipeddi, 1986; Zing, 2010).

For all these reasons and more, it becomes increasingly important for colleges and universities to plan strategically to ensure their continued viability and success (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fathi & Wilson, 2009). Universities need to plan strategically in order to develop a framework that aids purposeful decision-making processes and reduces the likelihood of merely being reactionary (Heifetz, 1994; Morgan, 2006; Tschannen-Moran, 2001). With the environment changing so rapidly, it is probably good to have a strategic plan to guide decisions in a way that reduces their politicization (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010). The presence of a plan makes it easier to mitigate the influence of special interest groups and agendas when hard choices need to be made (Christensen & Eyring, 2011).

Although risk management is more commonly associated with protecting an organization from threats, preparing to leverage possible opportunities is another form of risk management (Hopkin, 2012; Hurley, 2006; Oster, 1999). In these instances, strategic planning help an organization identify potential opportunities and prepare to leverage them for maximum institutional benefit (Attwell, 2007; Davis, 2011; Meyer, 2008; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012).

In the business sector, strategic planning is geared towards increasing profits and/or reducing costs (Mercer, 1991; Oster, 1999). The primary stakeholders in the business world are literally stakeholders in the sense that they have a financial stake in the organization's future (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997; Fathi & Wilson, 2009). In the university setting, it is a "rigorous and critical brainstorming session used by university authorities to steer the affairs of the university" that helps prepare the university for the future (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Oster,

1999; Paris, 2003).

The stakeholders in education are numerous and have priorities and agendas that are often at odds and this is a major differentiating factor when compared to planning in the traditional for-profit business sector (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004). In the college and university arena, stakeholders include students, parents, faculty, staff, senior administrators, federal, state, and local governments, private agencies, and the general public (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004). According to a study conducted in the United Kingdom in which different types of multiple stakeholder were compared, the researchers identified the degree to which leadership culture valued the satisfaction of different stakeholders and the actual behaviors or actions taken in support of stakeholder satisfaction were major determinants of how strategic planning was carried out (Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004).

Some universities plan strategically as a form of being proactive, but higher education strategic planning is more often conducted in response to some sort of threat (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010; Kezar & Eckel, 2002). Strategic planning initiatives at research universities typically involve hundreds of thousands of dollars in consulting fees and meeting logistics costs (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012). If you factor in the cost of the time of the frequently high salaries of the stakeholders at the table, the costs become even more substantial. These initiatives are often high stakes because plan failure not only doesn't respond to the threat that served as catalyst; matters are often made worse because of the waste or loss of resources invested in developing the failed

plan.

Strategic planning in education differs from strategic planning in the profit driven private sector (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). When engaging in strategic planning activities for non-profit organizations or academic institutions, it is not as straightforward as finding ways to reduce costs and increase revenue (W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). In today's economic climate, while financial challenges become more eminent, public universities and colleges still have a higher mission than just making dollars and cents (Burdman, 2009; Darling-Hammond, 2010a; Steck, 2003; Zing, 2010). Money is a means to realize the vision as opposed to being the ultimate goal.

With academic institutions, the mission is usually more focused on education and research (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Long, 2012). In addition to these priorities, many institutions have diversity and access initiatives as well as public good (Kezar & Eckel, 2002; Zing, 2010). With education being a driver of social mobility for people with low socioeconomic status, prioritizing diversity and access promotes the higher education commitment to public good.

Diversity in institutions of higher learning is frequently an area of concern from the perspective of equity as well as campus climate (Darling-Hammond, 2010b; Iv, 2010). With the changing demographics of the United States, the achievement gap positions diversity initiatives in higher education as critical to the nation's prosperity and viability. When planning, if diversity and social justice are not part of the plan and subsequent action items, underrepresented groups can continue to be underrepresented and underserved.



Educational institutions worldwide are engaging in strategic planning initiatives to envision and plan for the future (Bell, 2013; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Paris, 2003). In their quantitative study of strategic planning at three universities in Ghana, Ofori and Atiogbe found that while staff members were aware of the strategic planning process, the quality and degree of their involvement as stakeholders was impacted by the sophistication of communication methodologies as well as the perception that strategic planning was a top down exercise for management where their participation was not needed (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012).

Further, they found that the successful implementation was relative to the degree of staff engagement during and immediately following the process (Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012).

Staff has been identified as key to the successful implementation of strategic plans because they are the ones who do the infrastructure work (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; W. F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 1997). Effectively engaging staff during the planning process can positively influence their commitment to and ownership of the plan (Martin, 2009; Wernal, Karel, Jan & Wait, 2011). Conversely, failing to effectively engage staff can lead to initiatives that wither on the vine or in other words never actually get enough traction to get the desired result (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010).

This study examines staff engagement in relation to strategic planning and change management efforts. Implementation was identified through factor analysis as one of the key elements of strategic planning in nonprofit organizations (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000). In the same way that you are not a leader if nobody follows you, it is hard to call a plan strategic if it is not implemented effectively or in other words, followed. With the

high cost and potential risk associated with strategic plan implementation, understanding staff, one of the elements critical to plan success, is vital (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Staley, Seaman & Theodore-Shusta, 2012).

Research has shown the best laid plans are at the mercy of the people involved once it is time for implementation (Fathi & Wilson, 2009; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012). People have been identified as a critical success factor in strategic planning (Christensen & Eyring, 2011). Employee engagement has been touted as a means of measuring employee's level of commitment to their organization (Little & Little, 2006; Millar, 2012). As previously stated, people have been identified as the gatekeepers to change (Kriegel & Brandt, 1996), so engagement is important to innovation.

It is likely that understanding the perspectives of people at different touch points in an institution can be helpful in creating a context for successful implementations (Greenley, Hooley, Broderick, & Rudd, 2004). Strategic planning initiatives at top tier research universities usually involve a significant outlay of resources in a variety of forms which include consultant fees, costs of meeting logistics, and the value of the time contributed by stakeholders involved in the process of shaping the plan (Lawson & Kearns, 2009; Martin, 2009; Mirvis, 2012). With resources being scarce, it is important that these efforts bear fruit. Strategic planning initiatives in recent years have been undertaken in response to threats to the institutions' continued viability and effectiveness, as well as a means of addressing funding shortfalls (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Lozier & Chittipeddi, 1986; Zing, 2010).

In the Innovative University (Christensen & Eyring, 2011) offer a study of the

Brigham Young University – Idaho campus as a case study that details the process and results of a major strategic planning initiative. The authors offer insight into the value of an inclusive process that supports or produces highly engaged faculty, staff, and students. A strategic plan's effectiveness is limited to the effectiveness of the implementation (F. Crittenden & Crittenden, 2000; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012; Paris, 2003). This study is important because people have been identified as the most common reason for strategic plan failure, or as one author put it, "People are the gatekeepers of change" (Kriegel & Brandt, 1996).

### **Appreciative Inquiry**

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a strengths-based methodology that has been used to facilitate organizational change through shifting the focus of discussion away from problems and onto what is working well in an organization (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). AI has also been used to measure and improve employee engagement in the private sector (Keers, 2007). While it is a multiphase process when implemented in its entirety, it has been used successfully as an interview tool for qualitative research (Michael, 2005).

Appreciative inquiry was initially conceptualized by David Cooperrider when he was asked as a doctoral student to analyze the Cleveland Clinic and find out what was wrong with it (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). In his study, the Cleveland Clinic Project, he decided with the organization's permission to focus instead on what factors were contributing to the organization's success. His work led to results that were considered groundbreaking in the 1980's, delivering measurable improvements in employee morale and patient satisfaction among other factors. Since

then, Appreciative Inquiry has grown into a discipline that brings together practitioners from all over the world to discuss ways to envision and create better future states (Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan, & VanBuskirk, 2014). It has developed into an approach to organizational, team, and individual change that has been used effectively in the areas of engagement, diversity, sexual harassment preventions, and personal development.

In an article he co-authored for the journal of Public Administration and Policy with Diana Whitney, David Cooperrider offers the following definition of Appreciative Inquiry (AI): “Appreciative Inquiry is about the co-evolutionary search for the best in people, their organizations, and the relevant world around them” (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). AI is based on the theory of social constructionism and evidence that change can be sparked by the very nature of the questions being asked (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). In essence, participants are asked to think about and share the most positive experiences within a given construct as well as their visions of best case scenarios. Researchers have found that just by having people focus their attention of positive and desired outcomes, the energy in an organization or team begins to shift (Keers, 2007).

AI is a “framework for organizational change” that is based upon five core/flexible tenets (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011): Focus on the positive as a core value; Inquire into stories of life - giving forces; Locate themes in the stories and select topics from the themes for further inquiry; Create shared images for a preferred future; and Innovate ways to create that preferred future.”

Appreciative inquiry initiatives typically go through 5 phases (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Initially, the model only had 4 D’s, but

later evolved to include a 5th D which became in fact the 1st D (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001). The initially cited 4 D's are Discover, Dream, Design, and Destiny (aka Deliver or Deploy). The fifth 'D' was added later and is Definition.

With the 5D approach, work begins with Definition. In the definition phase the project leader's focus is on working with the sponsor or client to identify project scope (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Keers, 2007). In this phase, discussion centers on what areas you'd like to explore, with whom you will explore them and under what conditions or constraints. This is the phase in which roles and responsibilities are clarified as well.

In the Discovery phase, people are asked to let go of analysis of the deficits or problems in the organization and share stories about the things that energize them and give life or meaning (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). This is the time to ponder and point out the things that are working well, such as inspired leadership, thriving collaborations, successful partnerships, "planning that encompasses new ideas and diverse people", and other positive experiences that paint a picture of the high points in the organization.

The Dream phase asks participants to imagine a preferred state or share their vision of how things would be if they could wave a magic wand (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Keers, 2007). This is the phase that encourages people to envision the way things could be if... The Dream phase invites participants to co-create a more perfect future state that is informed by the earlier Discovery phase.

In the Design phase, participants are asked to share their ideas for processes, policies, and infrastructure to support the realization of the dreams (Keers, 2007; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). What actions can be taken to align strategy, vision and

action to create positive change? One complaint voiced during this and even the previous Dream phase is that participants often begin to create and implement before getting to the Destiny/Deliver/Deployment phase (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). It is at this point that they are reminded that change is often initiated just by asking the right questions.

In the Destiny phase which was in earlier iterations referred to as deploy or deliver, the focus is on creating ways to bring the dreams and their design into reality as well as how to foster an environment that makes the changes sustainable (Barge & Oliver, 2003; Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan, & VanBuskirk, 2014). This is the phase in which the activities associated with implementation or execution are said to take place. In reality, actions and mindsets associated with bringing about change towards realization of “the dream” often begin to happen right around the time the questions are being asked (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011).

In her qualitative study about the effectiveness of AI as an interview tool for field research, Sarah Michael discussed perceived risks and benefits (Michael, 2005). She identified AI as a way to get people to let their guard down and speak freely about sensitive topics. She interviewed 60 NGO leaders in various countries and found that participants were more comfortable and seemed to enjoy the interview process even though they had not anticipated it would work out that way. Michael arrived at the conclusion that Appreciative Inquiry is in fact an effective tool for field research.

Appreciative inquiry has been used effectively as a tool for field research (Michael, 2005). It has been used as a means of measuring employee engagement (Keers, 2007). It is also effective as a means of realizing gains in the area of employee engagement data (Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). One of the principles of AI is the

concept of simultaneity, which is that change begins at the moment the question is asked (Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan, & VanBuskirk, 2014). Practitioners of AI espouse the belief that change is change and innovation are initiated and shaped by the nature of the questions asked (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).

In a case study involving the use of AI to measure employee engagement at a mobile communications company, the approach was attributed with positively impacting the measure through employee led initiatives that were conceptualized during the inquiry (Keers, 2007). These results are in alignment with the AI principle of simultaneity (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). The very act of asking questions leads to creating solutions. In this case, a company with more than 10,000 employees was introduced to Appreciative Inquiry by a team of consultants and then decided to initiate a line of inquiry that to help the organization identify what inspired employees to be engaged in their work and feel connected to the organization. The inquiry was conducted by a team of ten individual employees worked in various areas throughout the organization and were considered highly connected to the workforce. Of the six key themes that emerged during the study, only one of them was monetary. The majority of the things identified by staff at O2 as being life giving were nonmonetary.

## CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

### Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to examine employee engagement at a major research university within the context of strategic planning and innovation (Creswell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014). This study aims to answer two research questions: ‘How do Black staff members engage in a strategic planning process?’ and ‘What are some elements that positively impact their engagement?’ as detailed in Figure 3. This study is important for a couple of reasons. Strategic planning and innovation are critical to organizational viability in these days of constant change and fluctuating funding for higher education institutions (Doyle & Delany, 2009; Zing, 2010). Employee engagement is a critical component in the success of strategic planning initiatives (Dooris, Kelley & Trainer, 2004; Fathi & Wilson, 2009; F Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Jones, Dixon, & Umoja, 2012).

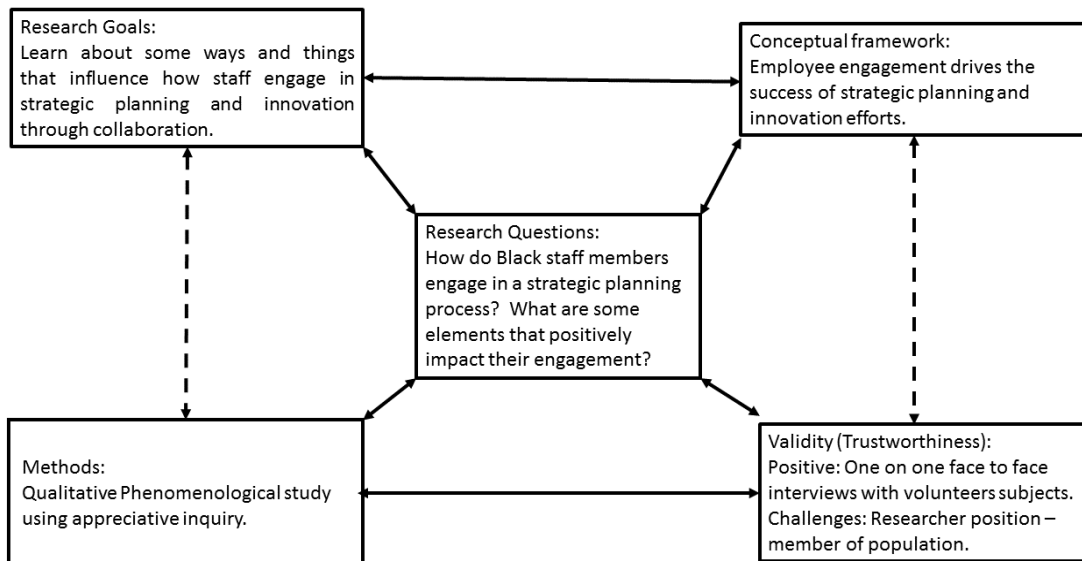


Figure 2. Research design



While AI projects typically go through all five phases (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001), the focus of this phenomenological qualitative study was the Discover phase of the process. During the Discover phase, the goal is to identify characteristics that are already present and positively experienced by the participant. It is a reflective process in which participants are asked to share stories about their best experiences. This approach is not intended to constrain or hinder participant ability to respond openly and candidly. Consequently, not all of the data collected could be expected to be positive. Also, while the interviews are focused on the Discover phase of AI, the method of inquiry commonly leads participants to begin providing data to inform the other phases of AI.

This study is different from typical AI projects because it involves a sample rather than the entire population. Even large corporations have implemented AI at their organizations in which the entire population was interviewed and given voice (Barge & Oliver, 2003).

### **Context**

The study took place at a major research university in Southern California with just over 3% of its staff population identifying as Black or African American. Aside from being such a small slice of the institution's population, the Black or African American staff members at the institution have been identified as one of the most vulnerable populations on campus based on qualitative and quantitative assessment and review of the institution.

Prior to the conceptualization of the study, a system-wide climate survey was administered to the entire population throughout the umbrella organization and includes staff at ten university campuses ("Institutional Research and Academic Planning," 2014).

The data indicated Black staff members are the most vulnerable population on the campus at which this study took place. Black staff reported experiencing being bullied, ignored, and isolated as well as receiving low performance evaluations as negative behaviors from supervisors, managers, and peers (*Campus climate survey for UCSD - Findings related to staff*, 2014). System-wide survey findings indicated underrepresented minority groups are less comfortable with the climate in the workplace than their white or more well represented counterparts (*Campus climate study: Summary of systemwide findings*, 2014). In this same report when compared with other groups on campus, Black staff is only second to American Indian and Alaskan staff when it came to feeling uncomfortable or very uncomfortable in their workplace on campus (*Campus climate survey for UCSD - Findings related to staff*, 2014).

An engagement survey was also administered to randomly sampled staff at each of the campuses in this same system (Towers Watson, 2012). This survey was a sample of staff at each of the ten campuses in the University of California system. The population sampled for this survey included staff at each University of California location except Hastings, ASUCLA, and the medical centers. The findings from this survey also showed a statistically significant difference in the responses of Black staff when compared with the sample population as well as other demographic groups within the sample. Black/Afro-American staff had the least amount of favorable responses to survey questions associated with communication and performance management.

### **Recruitment**

Because this study examined perception of ability to influence, participants were selected from the population of Black staff in professional support and management

positions with the line of reasoning being that they were more likely to have a perceived ability to influence the environment. The Staff Affirmative Action/Equal Employment Office in human resources supported the efforts of the researcher by sending the researcher's invitation to participate to the entire self-identified eligible population. That office had their technology group extract a mailing list of Black staff from the employee database. Population background data (vice chancellor (VC) area, gender, and payroll program) was provided to the researcher from the human as illustrated in Table 2.

A letter was drafted after receiving IRB approval was sent to 480 Black staff members. Further review of data revealed only 310 staff members met the researcher's criteria to participate. Of the 310 staff in the initial population query, 42 were employees with academic appointments and consequently excluded to leave the population eligible to participate in the study at 265 people. Employees with academic appointments were excluded because the social structure and power dynamics in higher education are such that academics tend to have a greater sense of power, influence, and entitlement than non-academic staff. Even if they are also administrators, their academic role places them in a position of greater power.

The researcher drafted a proposed recruitment letter and forwarded to the SAA/EEO department for review, approval before submitting to the Institutional Review Board for final approval. Once the letter was approved by the Institutional Review Board, the stamped version was rerouted to the SAA/EEO office for final review and distribution to potential participants. A digital copy of the letter was forwarded to the campuses addressing department for printing, stuffing and distribution via campus mail. In this

way, the researcher was able to reach out to the entire pool of eligible participants without violating the privacy of anyone.

Participants were invited to express interest in consideration for participation in audio-recorded one-on-one interviews in which the researcher would ask questions about their perceptions of experiences working for the university. The letter included the researcher's email and telephone contact information for potential participants to use for response to the invitation.

Table 3. Study population  
(Shown by Vice Chancellor (VC) area, gender, role, and status)

VC Area	Male	Female	MSP	PSS	Academic	Totals
Academic Affairs	17	41	4	47	7	58
CFO/Business Affairs	14	28	8	34		42
Chancellor's Office		3	1	2		3
Advancement	2	11	2	9		13
Health System	18	27	5	40		45
Resource Management & Planning	6	8	1	12		14
Marine Sciences	6	4	1	8	1	10
Health Sciences	37	57	7	63	24	94
Student Affairs	10	21	7	24		31
Totals	110	200	36	239	32	310

Note: Black staff population data provided to researcher by Equal Employment Opportunity/Staff Affirmative Action Office of study site. MSP stands for management support personnel and refers to staff in middle management positions. PSS stands for professional support staff and refers to supervisors and individual contributors with varying levels of responsibility and complexity in their responsibilities. Totals for roles do not include staff with senior management personnel (SMP) roles.

Forty-five staff members responded to the invitation to participate by email, an additional twenty responded by phone or in person and one responded by anonymous letter (attached) making the grand total of 66 which means a 21% response rate. Respondents to the invitation were asked which VC area they worked in, what their payroll program was, and how many years of service they had with the university in order

for the researcher to build background data profiles and confirm they had in fact been at the institution during the then recent strategic planning initiative (SPI).

### **Data Collection Process**

One on one interviews were conducted by the researcher with twelve of the respondents. Field notes were also taken during each interview. Interviews took place at the university in a private space to make it convenient for participants while also respecting their privacy and protecting their anonymity.

To help put participants at ease, the researcher began by thanking participants for support the study. Appreciative Inquiry was explained to the participants to help them understand why the questions were all framed from a position of seeking information about their best experiences and the things that they like the most about those experiences. Participants were assured that they were not required in any way to censure or edit their responses to fit the appreciative framework.

At the beginning of each interview, the researcher asked a series of questions to gather background information for use in building participant profiles as illustrated in Table 2. As illustrated in Appendix A, the interview questions were based on scripted prompts supplemented with probing questions to illicit more detail or clarification. The interviews ranged in duration from 16 minutes to 72 minutes. The length of the interview was based on the respondents. Some participants were more loquacious than others. The interviews were conducted in private study rooms at the university and took place over a period of two months. The questions started off general and became progressively more specific to change, collaboration and strategic planning.

### **Data Analysis**

The audio recordings were submitted to Rev.com for verbatim transcription. After receipt from the transcriber, interview transcriptions were reviewed and analyzed by in vivo and descriptive coding techniques (Creswell, 2012; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) with the support of nVivo 10 and Dedoose software to support the analysis process. Audio recordings of interviews were sent to a professional service for transcription. Transcriptions and field notes were hand coded by researcher to do a first pass and connect with the data. The researcher then uploaded interview transcripts to nVivo and Dedoose qualitative and mixed methods analysis software applications for more coding and analysis. The researcher then went on to further analyze data to identify themes that emerged.

### **Limitations**

The greatest concern in terms of validity, reliability, and trustworthiness are associated with making sure the sample was representative of the population and whether the participants in the study would be comfortable enough to express their true thoughts. Considering respondents were discussing feelings about the workplace, some of them may have felt they needed to hide their true feelings to avoid reprisal.

### **Privacy**

Concerns about privacy and confidentiality were addressed through the researcher detailing to each participant the methods by which participant identity would be protected. Researcher kept participant identifying information separate from the recordings of interviews. Field notes made no references to participant identity. Upon receipt and confirmation of transcriptions, the recordings were destroyed.

Participant identifying data was maintained in an encrypted and password protected database. Identifying references in the data such as department or project names were redacted from transcriptions.

### **Ethics**

The ethical issues faced by the researcher for this study include the lack of distance the researcher has from the participants. Being a member of the population being studied meant the researcher had to be aware of potential bias and assumptions while conducting interviews and interpreting data. In this study, it was particularly challenging because it was the site at which the researcher works and studies, so there is not much separation between research, study participants, and audience.

## **CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS**

### **Introduction**

Strategic planning processes are high stakes change and innovation efforts that require collaboration with and support from staff in order to be successful (Anonymous, 2005; Lozier & Chittipeddi, 1986; Macey & Schneider, 2008; Sandada, Poee, & Dhurup, 2014). Strategic plan success has been linked to employee engagement (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009; Ofori & Atiogbe, 2012).

This study aims to answer two research questions. How do Black staff members engage in a strategic planning process? What are some elements that positively impact their engagement? The underlying assumption is that an organization wants employees to be highly engaged since research connects engagement with performance, change readiness, and innovative behaviors (Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010; Millar, 2012; Shuck & Reio, 2013; Tomlinson, 2010).

In this section, background information on the participants will be followed by discussion of how the data was analyzed, what themes emerged, and a summary of results and then discussion of the findings relative to the two research questions.

### **Participants**

As shown in Table 3, the 12 individuals included in this study were heterogeneous in terms of gender, years of service, and functional area distribution. Each participant was given a pseudonym when referenced in order to protect their identity while still allowing for more detailed discussion of participant backgrounds.

Two thirds of the sample were female with the balance being male. These proportions closely mirror the gender ratio of the population from which the sample was



taken where the number of Black females in the population was very nearly twice that of Black males. The majority of the participants in the study were African American with a limited number (three) having been born and raised outside of the United States.

The participants have an aggregated total of 222 years of service to the institution with the mean number of years of service being 18.5. This longevity means the participants have been with the organization long enough to have had time to develop clear ideas about the university's practices and culture.

The participants were each employed in one of five different Vice Chancellor (VC) areas: Academic Affairs, Chief Financial Officer (CFO), Marine Sciences, Resource Management and Planning (RMP), and Student Affairs. Employees in the Chancellor's Office were not selected to participate because there were only three and that seemed like too small of a number to effectively protect identity. Although employees with academic appointments were excluded from the study, Academic Affairs has a great deal of staff members in roles that do not include academic appointments.

Table 4. Participant profiles with pseudonyms

Pseudonym	Role	Gender	Years	Functional Area
Andrew	Middle Manager	male	10	Infrastructure
Bill	Team Member	male	15	Infrastructure
Corey	Middle Manager	male	24	Community Outreach
David	Middle Manager	male	28	Academic Affairs
Angela	Project Manager	female	5	Business Affairs
Bianca	Team Member	female	8	Student Affairs
Carla	Project Manager	female	8	Student Affairs
Dina	Middle Manager	female	17	Academic Affairs
Elizabeth	Project Manager	female	22	Community Outreach
Fiona	Middle Manager	female	22	Student Affairs
Grace	Middle Manager	female	27	Administration
Henrietta	Project Manager	female	36	Student Affairs

## **Data Analysis**

Just over six hours of interview data was collected with the average interview lasting just over 30 minutes. Audio recordings were uploaded to Rev.com for verbatim transcription. The interview transcriptions were read, hand coded and then uploaded to nVivo 10 and dedoose.com for further analysis. The results are based upon review of the complete transcripts as well as codes attached to 264 excerpts from the transcripts.

### **Development of Themes**

Each participant was asked to respond to demographic background questions and then given a series of 10 question prompts (see Appendix A) along with probing questions based upon subject responses to question prompts. The resultant data was reviewed and excerpts were coded to one or both of the research questions. While each of the question prompts were designed to yield data that was relevant to one or the other of the two research questions, participant responses often touched on both areas.

Once excerpts were associated with one or more research question, the researcher began looking for patterns or themes in the data. The results of that analytical process are three themes associated with how participant engage in the strategic planning process and six themes relating to elements or factors that impact engagement.

The ways employees engage are grouped under engagement with three sub themes: unaware, peripherally involved, and centrally involved. The things that impact engagement levels are labeled drivers and the six themes that emerged are: opportunities, goals/objectives, inclusiveness, equity, supportive supervisors, and validation.

Validation is separated from supportive supervisors because validation comes from more sources than the supervisor. Validation is often provided through interaction

with and feedback from peers, subordinates, and customers. In many instances one excerpt is coded with multiple themes and subthemes. These themes and codes are in alignment with literature that discusses factors influencing employee engagement (Little & Little, 2006; Shuck & Reio, 2013; Welch, 2011).

### **Summary of Results**

Within the context of AI, the majority of participant responses were consistent with research expectations in terms of informing the Discovery phase. The majority of participant responses provided data about what the then current situation was as well as historical context. Consistent with the literature about AI's ability inspire thought and action by the nature of the questions being asked, participants provided some responses that offered insights that could be used subsequent phases Dream and Design.

When questioned about their awareness of and involvement in Strategic Planning Initiative on campus, participants' responses indicated most were generally aware of the initiative and some were involved in projects or teams that would have campus wide impacts. Based on the research, these responses indicated some participants were centrally engaged, with a few were peripherally engaged and a small number were unaware.

The response data related to the second research question, R2. What are some elements that positively impact their engagement? Yielded data included a broad range of responses that were narrowed down to barriers and bridges to support in the buckets of: equity, inclusiveness, opportunity, purpose, supportiveness, and validation (in alphabetical order). These findings are consistent with the emotional drivers of employee engagement described by the Dale Carnegie Institute in their white paper about employee

engagement (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012). The drivers they call out are feeling valued, confident, inspired, enthusiastic, and empowered. While the correlation is not one to one, parallels can be drawn.

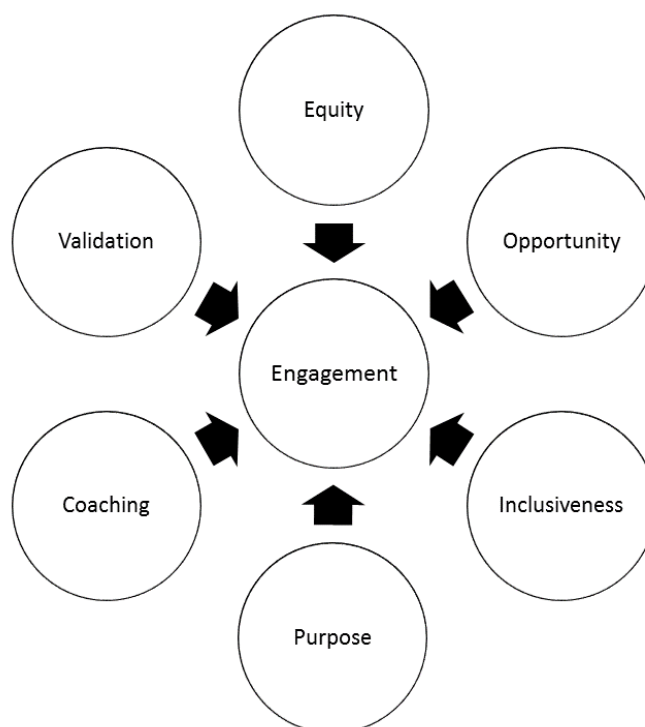


Figure 3. Engagement drivers

### **SPI Engagement**

The response data related to the first research question, R1. How do Black staff members engage in a strategic planning ranged from being completely unaware of the SPI to being centrally involved in projects or initiatives associated with the SPI. I asked each participant to tell me about their experiences first hearing about the Strategic Planning Initiative as well their participation in campus wide and department level activities. Peripheral involvement shows up somewhere on the spectrum between unaware and central involvement. It is important to note that for most of the participants,

their engagement was primarily behavioral rather than a combination of trait, state, and behavioral. This is important because behavioral engagement is more about ‘what’ to do rather than ‘why’ it is being done, which is more associated with trait and state engagement.

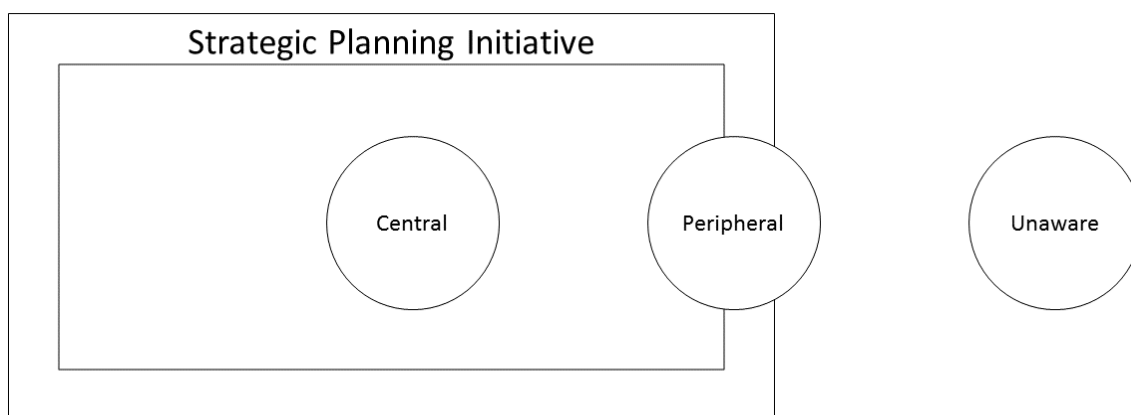


Figure 4. Spectrum of engagement in SPI

Many seemed to be centrally engaged in the strategic planning process and a few fell somewhere on the spectrum between peripheral and unaware. For participants that were unaware of efforts or projects in response to the strategic planning initiative, many of them were centrally engaged in projects with campus wide impact, they were just unaware of any connection between their activities and the SPI. For example, Angela, a project manager with five years of service to the university, discussed a few projects that were comprised of staff from departments across campus.

For one project in which Angela collaborated with other business units, she said, “But, I think the only reason why the team uh worked well together is because um, it was a new thing that we were doing and there wasn’t any wrong way to do it. And nobody had any pre-conceived notions about how things were supposed to work and um, nobody was doing it for recognition or credit.” She was excited about the collaborative process as

well as the positive outcome for the customer they had all come together to help. This is an example of someone who by their own report is completely unaware of what was happening with the strategic planning initiative while simultaneously being highly engaged in extra role behavior and innovation. Outside of the SPI framework, she came across as centrally engaged. Within the context of SPI, she was unaware.

According to the Gallup Organization, whose Q12 instrument has been widely used to measure engagement on more than 250 million employees in 195 countries and 70 languages, employees are engaged, not engaged, or actively disengaged (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013). The report describes engaged employees as drivers of innovation who feel connected with their organization and have a passion for the mission. Employees who are not engaged are described as "checked out" going through the motions without enthusiasm or passion. The actively disengaged employee is described in terms that closely resemble saboteur, beyond being unhappy, they actively undermine the productivity and happiness of their colleagues. For this study, engaged employees are central or peripheral and not engaged employees are unaware or outside of the framework. None of the participants came across anyone who was actively disengaged, so there is no category for being actively disengaged in this framework.

### **Unaware of SPI**

Some of the participant responses on the "not at all" end of the spectrum indicated a complete absence of awareness of or concern with the SPI. Six excerpts were coded "unaware. This is the least commonly discussed level of engagement described by the participants. At the same time, it is not uncommon for employees to believe strategic planning is a top down process that is conducted at the management level

When I asked about her involvement in the strategic planning initiative, Angela, responded, “I don't even know what that is. No idea.” She went on to add, “Yeah. I haven't heard about that ... At least not on my level.” With further probing she said, “We're doing (laughs) I don't know. You know, one of the...there are a lot of groups, in (department name withheld to protect participant) and um I think the way things are supposed to work is sort of a trickledown theory and uh sometimes it just doesn't trickle down. Just doesn't. So, if there are any great plans, I'm just not aware.”

For Angela, her experience was one of not being invited to the table. When asked about the work she does for the university, she became very animated and shared her experience collaborating with individuals on different teams with successful outcomes. When describing a specific collaborative process, she said, “We were all doing it in the spirit of you know, helping (the customer).”

When asked about her experiences with her supervisor, Angela expressed feeling a lack of appreciation and respect, “You know I'm going to give him the big rundown and all these other things happened to be going on and so forth and so on and he says to me. I didn't know you knew that. And I thought to myself, didn't you read my resume? Didn't you hire me? How could you not? How could you not know that?”

Angela is an example of a skilled employee with high levels of potential and interest but a low level of engagement. Her experiences in her department have not been such that she is engaged in any way in the strategic planning process, at least not to her knowledge. As someone who seems to have a high level of competence as well as an affinity for effective collaboration, she would probably contribute more positively to strategic planning and innovation efforts if she were more engaged. This employee's

responses indicated an absence of most of the emotional drivers for engagement described by the Dale Carnegie Institute being applied in her direct work area (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012).

At the same time, when she described her experiences working with colleagues in other departments, her enthusiasm and excitement indicated she is getting her emotional energy from work on teams composed or and/or led by people outside of her immediate area. As such, despite the lack of local impetus, she is engaging in innovative behaviors.

Bill, a sole contributor with 15 years of service responded with the following when I asked him about the strategic planning initiative. “Well, I mean I would have to know what it is in order to be able to even speak to one, and I couldn't tell you.” Further probing did not yield anything to contradict that statement. He was completely unaware of the campus wide initiative that had basically happened all around him.

Bill is someone who works in a variety of parts of campus and with people throughout all levels of the organizational hierarchy. While he is committed to and proud of the work he does within his role and responsibilities, he has not taken on any extra role responsibilities. The institutional knowledge he has accumulated over the past 15 years while working throughout the institution could be the source of invaluable contributions in the forms of collaboration and innovation if he were engaged to the extent that he would do so.

Unlike Angela, Bill is not having energizing collaborative experiences with colleagues in any part of his work life. He did however share how much he appreciates the opportunities to learn and work on new technologies in his workplace, so despite the factors that make him less engaged, his affinity for new technologies and innovative



techniques are evidence of a potential to contribute to strategic planning and other innovation efforts on campus. His lack of awareness of the campus wide strategic planning initiative indicated his voice was not directly involved in the process.

Angela and Bill are examples of employees who are completely unaware of the strategic planning initiative and its potential to impact them and the way they work as individuals as well as for their departments. Despite their lack of awareness, it is possible that they are working on projects that are driven by the SPI. When crafting the research questions, the idea that employees could be working on the SPI without being aware of it had not been considered. Based on the initial concept, the answer for these two individuals is they are unaware of SPI and by extension their involvement if any is present.

This silence or absence of communication underlines the sacrifice of efficiency over innovation, as in operational efficiency and productivity take priority over communication and collaboration (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010; F Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010). Transactional and directive leadership styles focus on the what with little or no discussion of why when the why discussion is where employee voice can lead to greater innovation (B. Bass, 1991; Dundon, Wilkinson, Marchington, & Ackers, 2004; Mirvis, 2012).

### **Peripheral involvement**

Some of the participants' responses indicated that they had an awareness of the SPI, but didn't participate in any focus groups, planning sessions or projects associated with furthering the SPI. The participant remarks in this category referenced hearing about the SPI and even actively seeking information about it, but no direct involvement beyond

that. This category presented itself slightly more than centrally involved, but the difference is marginal. The researcher considered combining peripheral and central involvement to create a new theme called involved, but wanted to present the differences between people who heard about the SPI and may have even sought more information, but didn't contribute to creating solutions.

Fiona, a middle manager with 22 years of service and responsibilities that include collaborating with and supporting the efforts of staff in numerous divisions responded, "I went to one town hall meeting, uh, I guess about a year ... I'm trying to remember which one it was ... about a year ago, but as far as, strategic planning, I didn't go to any of those meetings. I just got the information that was shared with us from the director of HR and from my direct report." "And I attended maybe one or two um, I think two for--one for sure, but I think I attended two because I came in on the tail end of one and I wanted to hear it from the beginning. So that's when I was first--when it was first brought to my attention." "Well, I think, you know, I think you know a lot of the strategic the stuff was kind of ambiguous you know, as to what they were looking for, um, from an administrative point of view my, my focus of things that I was concerned about I didn't think would be considered priorities at the time."

With further probing, she did share that she is involved with projects that are tied to specific goals in the strategic planning initiative. It seems the interpretation of the question was such that she thought it referred only to global campus wide committees and projects. Based on these things, her responses are being interpreted as peripheral involvement. This is an employee who is engaged and has actively participated in extra role campus community and activities throughout her career.

For Fiona, the SPI seemed like something abstract in which she didn't feel informed enough to participate. Fiona is an employee who has been in supervisory or middle management roles for more than a decade. In discussing her career, she shared the fact that she has had the good fortune to have supportive leaders who encouraged her professional and personal growth as well as to think critically and use her judgement to respond to issues and conflicts. She is an example of an employee who is experiencing all of the emotional drivers of engagement, exhibiting trait, state, and behavioral engagement as well as positively contributing to innovation and collaboration (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012; Macey & Schneider, 2008; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013).

### **Central Involvement**

Some staff responded in ways that indicated being involved with furthering the SPI. In their responses, they discussed participation in or leadership of efforts specifically initiated in response to or as part of the SPI.

Corey, has been with the university for nearly a quarter of a century and supervises a small support staff to help him meet his business objectives said, "I've looked at ways within my individual business unit to see how we could further align with our strategic mission. And as a result of that, have created um a new position that will help us identify not just at our department level but more at the division level of how we can bring additional efficiencies to the strategic plan. Not only at really the department level but campus wide level." Corey is an example of someone who is engaged to the extent that he is collaborating and engaging in innovative behaviors to the benefit of the organization. Interestingly, based on Corey's responses to other questions, the literature indicates he would be an even more engaged employee if he had a more positive

relationship with the leadership in his business unit. Corey's responses to questions about his best experience with a supervisor revealed an absence of rapport between him and his leadership.

Carla shared how she participated in a focus group to identify ways to improve student diversity. In her words, "I participated in a focus group, which was interesting to say the least (laughs)." When probed for more detail, she said she felt like some good ideas came up but she wasn't sure what would happen from there. Carla is still relatively early in her career at the university and is potentially more of a stakeholder in the organization's development than someone who is closer to retirement. She is currently highly engaged and willing to participate in extensive extra role behavior. Her concerns about what will be done with the data gathered in the focus group she participated in could be attributed to a stated lack of trust in the institution's commitment to addressing the issue. For staff like her, it is important for the institution to publicize its efforts and attribute some level of impetus to staff engagement or support.

David, offered the following example of how his manager supports his development and growth through exposure to and involvement in critical collaborations. He shared a story about what happened when he mentioned to his manager some concerns about a particular topic, "Yes, there [was] a committee being put together to develop \_\_\_\_\_ process and [I was told], "by the way you're the chair of the committee"." David is someone who stands out as a major contributor to organizational development and culture. He has a reputation for having an excellent work ethic and a high level of integrity. Perhaps having a manager who pushes you forward and encourages you to lean in can help build a reputation of that nature.

Before starting in her current role, Carla shared how she helped with process analysis and redesign at her old business unit. “[They] needed a subject matter expert about the office's business processes, about the functions, about all that good stuff. So, um, in numerous meetings and numerous interactions, I was able to provide the information that business analysts needed in order to move the project along.”

Grace is a middle manager with nearly thirty years of service to the university. When I asked her about her involvement in the SPI, she responded, “Well we have you know it's, we-we have a huge role. Um, on-on, i-if you think about sort of the, the take-away sentence from the Initiative, to be more student-centered, research oriented, um, and, and service oriented.” With Grace, it was more than just extra role behavior, she internalized and memorized the mission and saw it as her job to support it in whatever way she could. Further discussion revealed she was involved in several committees and meetings to help shape the future of the campus.

The pool of participants with responses that indicated central involvement included front line staff as well as managers. At all levels, Black staff members were engaged in activities that were central to the implementation of the plan. Some were serving as subject matter experts on teams developing business requirements, while others were leading teams and or projects to bring the vision to fruition. Each of these individuals feel like they have a stake in the campus' future as well as an obligation to be part of the solution.

### **SPI Engagement Drivers and Barriers**

The responses that informed the second research question, “What are some elements that positively impact their engagement?” fit into a larger number of buckets.

The differences were much more nuanced, so the researcher stopped consolidating at six. The six buckets or themes are opportunity, purpose, inclusiveness, coaching, validation, and equity. Each of these are things that can be positively and negatively influenced by leadership. The emotional drivers of employee engagement identified by the Dale Carnegie Institute are feeling valued, confident, inspired, enthusiastic, and empowered (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012). The themes that emerged are very similar to the emotional drivers identified by the Dale Carnegie Institute.

### **Purpose**

Each of the participants in this study made at least one reference to having a clear purpose or lack thereof having an impact on their team or group collaboration experience. Having clear shared goals or objectives is referenced in some way by one participant more than 10 times. Of the twelve interviews, clear purpose is referenced an average of 5 times per interview. Having clear purpose can contribute to feelings of confidence and empowerment which have been identified as emotional drivers of engagement (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012). In an article about considerations for leaders with an interest in empowering their employees (Spreitzer, 1997), it was stated that clear goals and objectives reduce employee ambiguity and uncertainty that accompany emerging empowerment. By definition, collaboration is working with another person or in a group to achieve or do something (Dictionary, 2015). “[When] our campus has an emergency, well we all have to get come, um, come together and perform, um, each part of your function.” This excerpt speaks directly to the power of people coming together to collaborate towards a shared interest or destiny.

Bianca, an individual contributor who collaborates with colleagues to balance

workload and strategize approach to supporting students shared that when you first came to the university, she appreciated the clarity of purpose, or in her words, “we've had some changes but we're very passionate about the work we're doing, very student focused, which was very important to me, um, very staff focused and staff development focused, which was also very important to me, uh, very open to ideas about improving, advancing, how can we help you develop.” Bianca has been with the organization for eight years and works in Student Affairs, where she works directly with students and thus very close to the mission that emerged from the strategic planning initiative.

### **Opportunity**

To a man or woman, the participants each mentioned the presence or absence of opportunities in their various form. Perceived opportunity or lack thereof connects well with enthusiasm and inspiration, a couple of the emotional drivers of engagement (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012). The types of opportunities most commonly discussed were primarily professional development and training related. Each participant mentioned opportunities to learn or advance as a sticking point for them. The employees who talked about advancement opportunities included learning in the form of training as well as experiential learning and precursors to prepare them for advancement.

For some it was the opportunity to try new technology or take a class. For others it was about the opportunities to network or participate in committees. Ultimately, these opportunities were presented in the context of professional growth or job enrichment. While this was mentioned by everyone, the total number of excerpts is 53 with the average number of references per interview being just under 4½ times. People cited applying for available positions to get their foot in the door with the belief in future

opportunities for advancement.

Henrietta, a female participant with more than 30 years of service and extensive indirect as well as direct supervisory responsibilities shared how she started her career. “...they didn't really have a programming position open at that point, they had a secretary position but that was a way in. They told me that this is what we have open, why don't you apply and go from there?” For Henrietta, she had a relationship with her first supervisors that was such that they told her how to get hired and encouraged her to use the position as a starting point. Over the course of her career, she shared that she had experienced a varying level of support and encouragement from different supervisors. She discussed how engaged she was in the development and structure of expansion in her department at a time when she had supportive and encouraging leadership as well as the types of leadership that led to her eventual withdrawal from extra role behavior.

Carla, a female participant with just under ten years of experience who had just started in a new position that was in alignment with her interests and aspirations, shared why she started in a position that didn't even closely resemble her desired role. “However, um, with that desperation and just trying to get my foot in the door at the university, I just pretty much took whatever I got.” This participant is an individual contributor with no supervisory responsibilities. She is working in a capacity that requires extensive collaboration with individuals from a variety of business and academic units throughout the university.

Participants made references to the opportunities to learn through professional development, experiential learning, and one on one training from supervisors or peers. Fiona, career employee who started at the university nearly twenty years ago and has



substantial leadership responsibilities discussed the learning opportunities presented when she first started at the university. “It was an opportunity to learn a lot of uh new things, um, you know they were just like laid out there for you.”

Dina, talked about her appreciation for the latitude to acquire new skills for use in her work during the time she worked in a particular unit on campus. She said, “Um, I loved the fact that if you wanted to, to take initiative to learn a different tool, it, it was encouraged, not discouraged.” She found this remarkable because it was not always the case in every position she had held at the university. In further discussion, she shared that “not all departments are the same.”

Carla, a female project manager who has 22 years of service and works in the field of human resources said, “What I'm doing now is just like at the peak of what I will call, um, my, my work life.” She also said, “In the twenty-two years that I've worked at UCSD, I'm working with the best manager I've ever worked with.” The participant shared telling her manager about her lack of comfort with a particular software program and how he responded by not only sending her to training, but also “...when I shared that desire with him, he, he's taken the time to teach that to me.” For Carla, the opportunity to learn this software was one of the key factors in her appreciation for her current work situation. She does not have supervisory responsibilities but works in a capacity that requires extensive collaboration with individuals throughout the university as well as the local community.

For each of the participants quoted who discussed opportunities to learn whether through formal training or experiential learning, this opportunity to acquire new skills or expand existing skills represented an investment in them and made them feel valued and

respected as individuals. The Gallup Q12 tool that is widely used to measure employee engagement levels in companies throughout the globe includes learning and growth as one of the measures (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009). Employees value the idea that their organization is willing to invest in their professional growth and continued relevance (Harter, Schmidt, Asplund, Killham, & Agrawal, 2010; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013).

For a few staff members, they associate their lack of opportunity with geophysical location of workplace and organizational sub-culture. Henrietta\*, who spent the first seven of her eight-year career with the university working in a location further removed from central campus, shared how opportunities to network and engage in the campus culture were limited. She said, "The other thing is that because of where my office was, it was kind of offset away from campus, main campus, didn't have a lot of engagement there." When asked to elaborate, she said, "Not a lot of interaction with any of the events on campus, um, anything that was, um, happening for staff on campus, um, just not really engaged in that stuff, not a whole lot." After working at that location for the majority of her career at the university, she was able to compete successfully for a position that was not only exactly in alignment with her aspirations, but also centrally located which afforded her the opportunity to increase her level of engagement. "I was able to engage a little bit more with the campus activities, either for staff, the different diversity initiatives, um, the different things on campus for students and staff to, um, bridge the gap, create diversity, offer inclusion, things like that." Henrietta is a sole contributor in a role that requires extensive collaboration with colleagues throughout the enterprise.

## Equity

Equity related topics were mentioned frequently, but not by everyone. While equity related excerpts at 50 mentions, were less numerous than opportunity, the people who did mention it, at just over 4½ times, it is on the average, mentioned more frequently than opportunity by the participants who mentioned matters in this realm. The discussions that involved equity issues were about bias, underrepresentation, employee affinity groups, power dynamics and a perceived absence of Black staff in leadership positions. While the study was not conducted using a racial lens, the themes that emerged are in alignment with literature about critical race theory and literature about microaggressions (Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000; Taylor, 1998). In his journal article, Primer on Critical Race Theory, Edward Taylor quotes Derrick Bell as saying, “Whites simply cannot envision the personal responsibility and the potential sacrifice inherent in the conclusion that true equality for Blacks will require the surrender of racism-granted privileges for whites.” Much of the dialogue around equity seemed to touch on and hint at white privilege as well as its impact on Black staff.

Participants made several statements about having less opportunity because of being Black. Statements were also made about being perceived as not having skills, knowledge or experience related to job. “There's a balance between I guess, um, our attitude as a whole towards the disparaging, um, unfortunate things that occur as far as Black staff here, but then there's also the realness of what happens with Black staff and how Black staff are treated. So ...” The preceding was uttered by Angela, a female participant referenced earlier in this chapter.

Corey, a male participant with more than twenty years of experience working at

the university and with some supervisory responsibilities discussed his perception of opportunity distributions. He said, “Uh in my experience and just from the department that I work in, if you're not Asian, or white you're on your own period.” This person works in a department in which he had experienced minimal professional growth while simultaneously observing others with less experience and education make tremendous strides under the same leadership. In this case, the employee is committed to the organization, but less engaged because of a perceived lack of opportunity and bias in his particular department as well as a lack of support or validation from his supervisor. Fortunately, the institution benefits because he has retained his commitment to results in his job but the department suffers because he has withdrawn and only collaborates with others to the extent he is formally required.

In the past, Corey had participated extensively in extra role behavior that was beneficial, but eventually withdrew when the new leadership in his department made it clear that not only were his extra role contributions not valued, they held little value for his contributions within his role. Perceptions of fairness or in this case unfairness have been identified as antecedents to employee withdrawal behavior (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010). Negative perceptions in regards to fairness often lead to intentions to quit and turnover. An employee with intentions to quit is much less likely to engage in innovative and collaborative behaviors to support change than an employee who is committed to a career within the organization.

**Sounding white.** Multiple participants made statements about people expressing surprise that they were Black after speaking with them on the phone and them meeting them in person. Some were told they sounded white. Others were told they didn't sound

Black. The people making these statements were management and supervisors, but also rank and file front line staff members as well. In each case, the participant was someone who had more than a few years of experience working at the university. The people making the observations about them were also from all strata from front line to management.

Dina discussed her experiences of having colleagues tell her she “sounded White” over the phone. She said, “. . .I just reacted, I thought I sounded like I had an education but apparently I sounded white which I don't know what that sounds like because to me there's people that sound like they have a certain level of education and people that sound like they don't.”

Andrew has been working at the university for 10 years and has had a trajectory in which he advanced from sole contributor to supervising a small staff. He commented on similar experiences when meeting colleagues for the first time. “They see the name, they've spoken with me on the phone, [and] we've communicated by email. When they see me in person, I can always see the look on their face, and they're saying, ‘Oh. You're\_\_\_\_\_.’” This participant expressed positive experiences after people have had a chance to get more comfortable with him. He did however, also share a story about an experience in which a colleague refused to collaborate with him and provide information critical to a project they had been assigned to complete jointly. In that case, the project failed to be completed because the absence of the needed communication was an insurmountable obstacle.

“If you're Black and male they expect you to talk a certain way, to have a certain viewpoint.” The participant saying this, Bill was a sole contributor with no supervisory

responsibilities. In his case, he shared frustration with the fact that although he has been doing his job for nearly twenty years and has demonstrated a high level of proficiency, when people come to his department for assistance, they would walk past him to ask less experienced and less knowledgeable white colleagues for their help. In his words, "It's like a mental condition and placement in perspective as far as like who we are, how we're all in this campus. You know, they, um, people may feel comfortable when going to their own versus coming to one of us."

Dina has been with the institution for nearly twenty years. In that time, she has provided supportive services to faculty, staff, students, and members of the general public. She appreciates the opportunity to work with colleagues from diverse backgrounds. She has had the experience of working with supervisors she perceived as fair who gave opportunities based on performance and ability as well as supervisors she perceived as biased against Blacks and others who are not from their preferred demographic group or groups. Because of this awareness of bias as well as the potential to be perceived as biased, she makes it a point to make her personnel decisions based on the individual's performance rather than stereotype or conjecture based on bias. In her own words, "And I've been in, when I interview people, I don't, um, purposely do not like to make an assumption based on what their application says that oh, this person's perfect, I like to meet the person and then gather my impression from how they handled themselves in the interview."

The perceived bias and lack of opportunity based on race are not uncommon. While the questions were purposely not framed to prompt racialized responses, racial bias and perceived discrimination was embedded in some of the responses for each of the

participants interviewed. The biggest negative to these interactions in which employees were “called out for ‘sounding white’” is the impression of being penalized or treated as less than once their Blackness had been established. Critical Race Theory speaks to racism and bias being embedded in institutional systems (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solorzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). With one of the tenets of Critical Race Theory being the “permanence of racism”, the emergence of equity as a theme is not surprising (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado & Stefanic, 2012).

One source of Black employee support that came up in a lot of discussions as an example of positive collaborations as well as a means of connecting with and learning about the university was the Black Staff Association. Staff (BSA) expressed appreciation for the outreach and programming, but also a desire for more programming geared towards professional development.

Angela, discussed the fact that she was pleased with the persistence of the outreach efforts focused on getting her involved with the Black Staff Association. She said, “Actually the thing I remember the most about when I first started working at the university was the outreach from the Black Staff Association.” The same participant began delving into the Dream phase of AI when she expressed an interest in seeing the Black Staff Association play a more active role in professional development, mentoring, and networking activities. In her words, “instead of the groups and associations that we have, always revolving around calendar things and social issues, we really need to pull together and have it revolve around professional opportunities.” She expressed a desire to see BSA members sharing and exchanging skills. “I just want us to be better

professionally. I want us to belong to a professional group, where the time that we're taking is not social time, it's time where we're learning, we're training, we're sharing, you know, we're helping each other. Not, to say that we need to cheat anybody's system. Or, or anything but that, but you know, why can't we share a class, or why can't you share with me what you learned in a class. Why can't we all understand what industry trends are, why should you have to struggle to figure out what goes on in \_\_\_\_\_ (department). Maybe a Black Staff Association meeting should be all about what the hell is going on in \_\_\_\_\_ (department), how do you make it happen, teach me how to do things that are associated with your job, why don't we spend time?"

When Corey did engage in extra role behavior, some of his activity was in support of the Black Staff Association. Fortunately, he still continues to maintain relationships which offer him encouragement and support despite his withdrawal from involvement in the organization. The Gallup Q12 instrument includes having friends at work amongst its measures of employee engagement (Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013).

### **Inclusion**

Responses associated with inclusiveness were about team dynamics. Participants discussing their best collaborative experiences consistently brought up inclusiveness or lack thereof as a defining dimension. The best collaborative experiences were those in which they were allowed to participate fully and everyone at the table had a voice. In an article about effect of institutional culture on change, collaborative leadership is identified as a factor that supports successful change efforts (Kezar & Eckel, 2002). In the article, collaborative leadership is "defined as a process where the positional and



nonpositional individuals throughout the campus are involved in the change initiative from conception to implementation.” The data pointing to inclusiveness is in alignment with this concept. Several participants discussed how important it is for them to feel like they have a voice when they are part of a team.

Of all the participants, it is notable that Angela made the strongest statements about a desired future state. Her comments were very clearly statements that can inform the Dream phase of AI. One statement Angela made that closely mirrored the Kezar & Eckel (2002) definition of collaborative leadership was, “So-so engaging all the people, I think we need all the staff at every level to be engaged. I think we need to um, devote some resources to skill-building.” This particular individual was speaking to the importance of inclusion, but also having participants trained to the extent that they are prepared to fully participate in the process. With her less than ten years of service to the university, this participant had a shorter than average tenure with the institution, but had had the opportunity to collaborate with staff from business and academic units throughout the organization due to the nature of her work. She is an individual contributor with no supervisory responsibilities, but she also serves as an architect of complex projects and agreements with exposure at the highest levels of the organization.

The implication based on participant response seems to be that although Black staff are open to and even enjoy inclusive collaboration, they are experiencing to a degree that leaves them wanting. Some participants described their experiences on teams as typically being “for show”. They walk away feeling like the teams were formed and meeting were held so that leaders could say it was an inclusive process. For example, when speaking with Corey about his best experiences collaborating on a team, he also

shared what he disliked the most. He said, “But although the team is formed, it's ... the decision was made before the team was actually charged if you will. So a decision was already made. It was more like we have to kind of do this to go through the process to show that it was collaborative. But pretty much the decisions are to be made in ... so it's kind of controlled kind of thing, if you will.”

On the other hand, participants became more animated when discussing collaborations that were inclusive and engaging. For example, Corey went on to share that he liked processes that “allows for team members to be very much included in the process” and “one that allows you to fully participate.” Employees are more likely to withdraw when they feel they have no voice or power in a situation and more likely to engage in collaborative and innovative behaviors when they feel that the process is inclusive (Fugate, Prussia, & Kinicki, 2010; F Gambarotto & Cammozzo, 2010; Mirvis, 2012; D. Smith & Cantrell, 2011).

### **Coaching**

Direct supervisors described as supportive coaches were instrumental in providing their staff with learning and professional development activities that included mentorship, experiential learning, and coaching. Other ways supervisors were reported as being supportive include mentoring, protecting staff from negativity and showing a genuine interest in their employees. Going back to (Kezar & Eckel, 2002), another factor in effective change is senior administrative support which they describe as “individuals in positional leadership providing support in terms of value statements, resources, or new administrative structures.”

Fiona, a participant who had experienced several different leaders and leadership

styles during her 20+ years of working at the institution, shared what she liked about a particular supervisor. “Um, my manager was less a manager and definitely more a mentor and hands on and I learned a great deal from this particular manager.” She credited the experience of learning from that manager with preparing her to successfully complete for a promotional opportunity. Henrietta had experienced some level of success in her career and had a great deal of leadership responsibility.

David, a participant with 15+ years of experience and some management and administrative responsibilities shared his appreciation of having worked with a leader who was a coach. He said, “It made it good because um, this particular manager kept me informed of everything that was happening in the department um, regardless of what level it was, I felt included. Um, gave me the flexibility to be creative and taking on additional responsibilities, tasks and projects.” He credits his professional growth to the coaching and mentorship he received from this leader.

A female participant with more than 20 years of service to the university shared what she liked about working with a particular supervisor. “She created a working environment where we just liked seeing each other every day and doing the work that was before us.” She also talked about how the leader shielded her employees from external stresses and pressures by dealing with them herself instead of letting them disrupt the energy in the workplace.

Carla, a participant with less than ten years of experience at the university shared what she liked about the way a manager responded after hearing about an error that had been made. “I felt so bad! (laughs) I was just- I felt really, really bad! Um, and when I talked to my supervisor, the things that she told me, and she said, "Well, it's not the end

of the world.”” She went on to discuss the supervisor going through the process with her to discuss ways to avoid repetition of the error. While Carla is still early in her career, she credits this supervisor with helping her develop as a professional.

Henrietta, a participant with more than two decades of experience working at the university shared what she likes the most about her current supervisor. “He encourages his team to do better, to be better; to want better.” She seemed genuinely excited about working with him as she approached her retirement years.

The impact of having a supervisor who provides coaching actually touched every theme that arose. The way supervisors relate with and treat their staff seems to have very far reaching impact on the experience and engagement of the employee (O’Boyle & Harter, 2013; D. Smith & Cantrell, 2011).

### **Validation**

Participants often cited examples of factors that pointed to validation. Feeling that their supervisor or manager trusted them or had confidence in their abilities reinforced supported staff engagement through loyalty and efficacy. Staff members discussed being willing, excited, and or honored to be asked to take on a project that required them to build or build on non-existent or undeveloped skill sets. Another cultural element described by Kezar & Eckel, (2002) as supporting successful change efforts is staff development which they describe as “a set of programmatic efforts to offer opportunities for individuals to learn certain skills or knowledge related to issues associated with the change effort.”

Andrew, a participant mentioned earlier shared that he gets to go to conferences and other professional development activities. He also said, “I don't feel that I'm just the

proverbial cog in the wheel”, and “I feel that the job that I do is recognized for its importance, and the contributions that I make as part of the team that I'm in.”

Andrew is also someone who engaged in extra-role behavior when asked to volunteer in support of different initiatives on campus. His willingness to go above and beyond his normal duties is consistent with someone with a high level of engagement. As mentioned earlier, he took it upon his self to attend town hall meetings and participate in focus groups during the strategic planning initiative.

For some, the validation came in the form of being asked to take on projects outside the norm or with a high level of criticality. Dina shared an experience she had earlier in her career. At that time, she was a sole contributor with no supervisory experiences. A supervisor asked her about her skills in a particular area and then asked if she would be willing to take on a project that would require her to stretch a little outside of her comfort zone. “I was really honored to be able to do that and was asked to do that.”

David, a male participant with some supervisory responsibilities and more than twenty years of service expressed how he felt about his “place” in the university. He said, “I feel like an important cog in the wheel.” David’s validation is largely attributed to having a supervisor that expresses appreciation and provides opportunities for David to contribute to the organization in highly visible and critical spaces.

Some participants also discussed experiences and perspectives that could be described as invalidation or feeling devalued. Angela said, “Because for the most part, uh well my experience, people here are treated like cogs. You know? And cogs are manufactured and you pop one out and you plug another one in and the whole thing still works.”

Each participant's responses included references to enjoying their connection with colleagues and working collaboratively to achieve goals in alignment with the campus mission. For some it was on a small scale in terms of being very specific to tasks or situations, such as coming together with others when a crisis occurs to get things back in order. For others it was about knowing that the work they do contributes to the research mission or helps students. The sample is admittedly skewed in the direction of people who will volunteer to do something beyond what is required of them as they had to volunteer and go out of their way to participate in the study. Overall, whether engaged or approaching not engaged, each of the participants expressed care for the university and its community.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION**

### **Introduction**

This study aimed to answer two research questions. How do Black staff members engage in a strategic planning process? What are some elements that positively impact their engagement? Most literature about strategic planning and innovation focus on leadership and the actions of leaders with staff as a consideration, but not central to the study. Consistently, research shows change efforts succeed or fail based upon staff. With people being the gatekeepers to change and innovation being the norm more often than not, any attempts to study these processes from the staff perspective could help demystify how to get employees to engage in change processes.

The then recent strategic planning initiative was used as the context for this study because of the criticality of employee engagement to successful implementation as well as to serve as a common point of reference since it was a campus wide initiative. In addition to the literature reviewed, this study was informed by findings from campus and system-wide employee surveys on employee satisfaction and engagement as well as the campus climate. Findings from each of these surveys indicated areas of concern for with Black employees in relation to engagement, career satisfaction, and the campus climate. Nevertheless, the study was not approached through a racial lens. With exception of the final question, the questions were intentionally framed without reference to race. Nevertheless, throughout each interview, participants referenced their Blackness as a factor in their workplace experience.

### **Summary**

While problems were mentioned and noted, most participants expressed an

appreciation of and for the opportunity to work at the university and look forward to staying through retirement. A few said they love their job and feel like they are doing exactly what they are meant to be doing. Many, while disappointed and possibly disenchanted, still hold fast to hope things will improve in time. These are also the people who are willing to go above and beyond their job title or official position to be part of making things better or solve problems. At the same time, it became clear that opportunities exist to address barriers to engagement that were discussed by each participant.

Applied critical leadership is a synthesis of transformational leadership, critical race theory, and critical pedagogy that is oriented strongly towards action (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011). This approach factors in the needs and aspirations of individuals being led, with cognizance of racial and social justice implications with a focus on identifying ways to prevent, eliminate or at minimum mitigate the impact of injustice through real action. The space where these theories intersect is fertile ground for building relationships, improving campus climates, and developing future leaders in support of sustaining and improving upon the initial impact of change efforts (Santamaría & Jean-Marie, 2014; Santamaría, 2014).

### **Appreciative Inquiry Approach**

Appreciative inquiry was used as the theoretical framework and method of inquiry in this study for several reasons. The social constructionist leanings of appreciative inquiry are consistent with approaching situations with a solution orientation (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Ryan, Soven, Smither, Sullivan, & VanBuskirk, 2014). The research questions are focused more on what works rather than what doesn't.



Appreciative inquiry is noted to have an almost immediate impact in support of change because people's thoughts and future actions are often influenced by the very nature of the questions being asked (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Magruder Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). These issues have been examined repeatedly from a perspective of what's wrong and the researcher wanted to avoid redundancy. Appreciative inquiry is a social constructivist approach that promotes solution oriented thinking (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001; Magruder Watkins, Mohr, & Kelly, 2011). Using this approach seemed to be unsettling to many of the participants. They had expected the interview to be difficult and focused on looking at things through a negative lens. During many of the interviews, participants said they liked the approach and felt like it was more focused on finding solutions than pointing fingers or casting blame.

While the focus of this study was the Discovery phase of the AI process with an aim towards gaining of understanding of the current state of affairs and influencing factors, participant responses included data appropriate to the Dream and Design phases of the AI process. Examples of these instances include expressions about a desire to be treated fairly and provided the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to the institution's success while experiencing professional development and career expansion. The majority of the people participating in the study mentioned their attraction to employment with the institution because of the potential to experience a career with positive trajectory.

When discussing their best experiences, participants became animated and seemed to be experiencing an increase in energy rather than fatigue. From the perspective of the researcher, the act of sharing these stories seemed to affirm positive aspects of the institution and possibly remind the participant of why they felt connected and wanted to

engage. This particular phenomenon is one of the known positives byproducts of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2001).

Getting more granular, the stories with the greatest degree of energy increase and positivity involved positive experiences with supervisors. Supervisors, managers, and other leaders are positioned to have the most significant impact on employee engagement through their direct interactions as well as through policies and practices (Anonymous, 2005; Little & Little, 2006; O'Boyle & Harter, 2013). The supervisor relationship was positive when the supervisor seemed to care about the participant and demonstrated the caring by taking the time to mentor or teach, provide opportunities to learn through experience as well as formal training, and supported employee in difficult or challenging workplace situations. These findings are consistent with employee engagement literature that calls upon supervisors and leaders to attend to the emotional drivers of engagement and treat their employees as individuals rather than make blanket assumptions about employee strengths, weaknesses, needs, desires, and preferences (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013; D. Smith & Cantrell, 2011; Tomlinson, 2010).

One interview participant actually sat up taller in her seat, began to smile as she was speaking and spoke more loudly when asked about her best interaction with a supervisor or manager. She began by saying, "I have had ONE good supervisor. Well, not that the others were all bad, but this one will always stand out for me." When I asked her to elaborate, she said this one "seemed to genuinely care about her staff and making sure we had everything we needed to do our jobs and grow."

The supervisor relationship was positive when the supervisor seemed to care about the participant and demonstrated the caring by taking the time to mentor or teach,

provide opportunities to learn through experience as well as formal training, and supported employee in difficult or challenging workplace situations. The campus family was also mentioned by several in some form or fashion as one of the things that make this a great place to work. The campus family label included supervisors, colleagues, direct reports, faculty, staff, and students.

Participants loved the work they did because it was interesting or meaningful to them. Many of them appreciated having the opportunity to help students and solve real business problems. “I am a meaningful cog in the machine” was explicitly said by David but resembles a sentiment echoed by many in different ways. The participants each expressed a level of commitment to and appreciation for the significance of their role in furthering the organization’s education and research initiatives.

Less positive or negative themes that emerged were the perception that leadership positions and opportunities for advancement are not offered to African Americans. Participants shared a feeling that supervisors are more comfortable working with staff members that are more like them culturally. These two concepts are linked in the sense that people tend to promote and provide opportunities with whom they are familiar and have positive working relationships.

While most participants expressed feelings that the work they do is important, Angela implied that while the work is important to the institution, the people are not. She said, “We are treated like cogs, you can pop one out and replace with another and not miss a beat.” While this was not a sentiment that was widely echoed, it was strong enough to merit mention. When asked to elaborate, she said she feels like her department doesn’t value her contribution and skills. During her interview, she also

expressed her dismay at the surprise expressed by her manager about the depth of knowledge she demonstrated when discussing the background surrounding a specific issue. She said she didn't understand why she was hired if they didn't read her resume and understand what she was bringing to the table. This particular individual has less than five years with the university, so her experience is limited to the group she has worked with in that time.

For better or worse, using an appreciative inquiry approach reduced the likelihood of any negative sentiments expressed by participants resulting from the interviewer leading the witness. In the Discovery phase of AI, the goal is to gain insight into what the status quo or existing circumstances are or are perceived to be by participants.

### **Implications for Social Justice**

The implications for social justice are manifold. This data can support not only the interests of Black staff at the university, but also for faculty, students, and the surrounding community. Further, some of the concerns of Black staff are likely to be shared not only by Black staff, faculty, and students, but also faculty, staff and students from other underrepresented or marginalized groups. A popular economics aphorism that comes to mind is, "The rising tide lifts all boats" ("Etymology - Origin of 'a rising tide lifts all boats' - English Language & Usage Stack Exchange," 2015). In economic theory, it speaks to how improving conditions in the general economy can benefit all participants in that economy. In this case, addressing the opportunities that emerged in this study can potentially benefit the campus in general from a variety of perspectives.

For Black staff, having their concerns addressed could impact not only the way they feel about their work, but also their level of commitment to the institution.

Employee engagement is often confused with employee satisfaction because of their obvious relationship, but the relationship inherent with engaged employees contributes so much to the speed of change because increased trust leads to reduced friction or resistance in organizational change activities (Covey, 2006; Daly & Chrispeels, 2005). This could positively impact their mental and physical well-being. These same benefits could be shared by Black faculty and students as well as non-Black faculty, staff, and students.

From a bottom-line perspective, the campus will benefit from the added value of increased staff engagement. Increasing change tolerance, innovation, and productivity are all good effects from increased staff engagement. Going back to staff being the gatekeepers to change, having more staff engaged should increase the institutions agility and ability to adapt as needed (Christensen & Eyring, 2011; Kriegel & Brandt, 1996). Further, engagement has been connected to absenteeism and turnover.

### **Leadership Considerations**

Applied critical leadership seems like a good fit for environments with a great deal of inherent change it is a framework that integrates critical race theory and critical pedagogy with transformational leadership (Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011). It is an integration of transformational leadership's emphasis on alignment between employee and organizational goals (B. M. Bass, 1999), critical race theory's focus on critically examining issues of race, law, and power (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Taylor, 1998), and critical pedagogy's emphasis on thinking deeply about issues of social justice and taking action (Wink, 2005). It brings together these disciplines for an action oriented approach to addressing social justice concerns. Literature directly addressing or

referencing this theory is limited, but it has practical application that is timely within the context of a dynamic higher education environment with an eye towards innovation and social justice because it focuses on choosing change rather than choosing to change or assimilate (Gross, 2011; Santamaría & Santamaría, 2011). This particular theory stands out particularly because of its orientation towards action.

Also significant in this theory is its insistence on viewing leadership through a critical theory lens that encourages leaders to acknowledge and respond to organizational needs presented by the presence of or need for diversity (Santamaría, Santamaría, Webber, & Pearson, 2014; Santamaría, 2014). It functions from a place of understanding the presence of institutionalized and systemic racism as well as the persistence of unconscious bias (Iv, 2010; Offermann, 2013; Wroblewski, 2015).

### **Recommendations**

The supervisor/employee relationship was a focal point of the findings. The ability of a manager or supervisor to connect with their staff is a critical component of employee engagement (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012; Harter, Schmidt, Killham, & Agrawal, 2009; D. Smith & Cantrell, 2011). With so many participants citing experiences or perceptions of supervisor bias and exclusion, the diversity issues cannot be ignored.

Supervisor training activities that includes cultural competency and the benefits of employee development are critical, but providing supervisors with support beyond the days they spend in training can help them manage the practical application of coursework during their daily operations. Subject matter experts promoted to supervisor roles could particularly benefit from leadership development that emphasizes these skill sets.

Interventions that have been successful at other institutions include targeted professional development programming, internal internship programs, and leadership development for supervisors (Iv, 2010; Mayhew, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006; D. G. Smith & Parker, 2005). Of those mentioned, supervisor development seems to hold the highest potential for the most immediate impact with the participants in this study. Supervisors have the potential to impact not only specified individuals but also to set the tone for their entire work area.

To move from having employees feel like they are just “cogs in the machine” to having them feel like living breathing stakeholders is no small feat, but a task whose efforts can potentially reap exponential rewards in the form of engagement, productivity, reliability, and excellence. Many of the issues that surfaced during this study cannot be assumed to be limited to the experiences of Black staff. At the same time, perceptions in the areas of bias, equity, and inclusion cannot be ignored.

Equity and inclusion concerns expressed point to the need for in depth training to increase cultural competency and help individuals recognize their own conscious and unconscious biases. This training should be provided not only to supervisors and managers but to the entire organization. Implicit bias training has been effective at other universities and colleges (Mayhew, Grunwald, & Dey, 2006; Wroblewski, 2015). Equipping staff with the language and tools to identify and meaningfully discuss cultural differences and bias in an open manner can lead to a shift in workplace dynamics. Bringing unconscious bias into the light can diminish the power of the unconscious bias on decisions impacting staff in the workplace.

The Black Staff Association was mentioned by several participants as a positive

touchpoint for them while working at the institution. While it was positive, it was indicated that its effectiveness is linked directly to the availability of volunteers to coordinate relevant and useful programming. It and other staff affinity groups could benefit from leadership development and support from the institution beyond the financial support they currently receive. Acknowledgement of the contributions of its leaders each year could also go a long way towards increasing the pool of volunteers willing and available to support the programming and services offered by it and similar associations. Leadership development programming to specifically benefit the staff members who have engaged in extra role behavior by volunteering to lead and coordinate programming for staff associations is one way the institution can validate these efforts (Dale Carnegie Institute, 2012).

The participants whose responses included data to inform the Dream and Design phases consistently mentioned professional development and career growth as elements they'd like to see expanded to include more Black staff. Creating professional development opportunities that actually translate into skills and experience to help staff be more competitive for internal advancement would send a clear message that the institution is committed to retaining and developing employees is another approach that would impact employee engagement in a positive way. One approach to professional development that has proven effective is employee internship programs. This is one way to address the gap between training and experience when looking at the competitiveness of applicants for promotional opportunities. Professional development and advancement opportunities are cited frequently in the engagement literature as means by which employee engagement is positively impacted (O'Boyle & Harter, 2013; D. Smith &



Cantrell, 2011).

The institution where the study took place already has a process in place to develop and recruit for internships. While it is not widely in use, it has been pointed to as a means of providing staff with experiential learning opportunities which translate into real experience using new or underutilized skills. Internships are a formalized approach to learning by doing. Employees are recruited to work on specific projects or desks to provide support while gaining training and experience outside of their regular job. Internships are a low risk way to work with someone who has an aptitude but not the experience or training to qualify for a more formal role. They tend to range in duration from 30 days to a year and give the employee an opportunity to demonstrate competence while increasing proficiency to perform in a different capacity and perhaps be more competitive for future opportunities within the organization.

### **Future Research**

Deeper exploration of employee engagement through an appreciative inquiry framework presents opportunities for universities to proactively ensure existing best practices for illumination as well as involve employees in the co-creation of their own engagement. Other opportunities for future research include examining Black staff perceptions of other dimensions of employee engagement with the aim of identifying ways to better attract, connect with, and retain Black staff. Exploring appreciative inquiry applications to employee engagement with more diverse populations also holds rich potential. Further, a comparative study in which Black staff perceptions are compared to those of non-Black staff could inform as to what significant differences exist if any present.

## APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW LEAD-IN QUESTIONS

*Please tell a story*

- *...about when you first started working here and your initial impressions.*
- *...about your favorite part of working here.*
- *...about best experience collaborating with colleagues on a diverse team.*
- *...about best experience working with a supervisor or manager.*
- *...about one thing that makes you feel like you belong here.*
- *...about a time when you shared an idea or opinion that impacted the university, your department, or your work.*
- *...about how you first heard of the strategic planning initiative.*
- *...about something your department is doing in response to the strategic planning initiative.*
- *...about a personal experience you have with the strategic planning initiative.*
- *...about something you wish you had been asked about, but wasn't.*

Before beginning the lead-in questions, a set of background questions were asked for use in building a background profile for each participant. During each interview, probing questions will be asked to drill deeper than lead-in questions and illicit more meaningful data specific to participant responses.

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