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A COMPREHENSIVE CASE STUDY OF ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF TURNOVER IN HIGHER EDUCATION:

A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY APPROACH

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A SELF-DETERMINATION THEORY APPROACH

A DISSERTATION APPROVED FOR

THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES

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Abstract

Administrative staff make up approximately 80% of the higher education workforce, yet their experiences with turnover and retention remain far less studied than those of faculty. This three-phase dissertation uses an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design to examine administrative staff turnover at a higher education satellite campus through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT). SDT proposes that the satisfaction or frustration of three basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, fundamentally influences motivation, well-being, and behavioral outcomes including turnover intention.

The first phase of this study comprised a qualitative inquiry drawing on semi-structured interviews with nine former administrative staff members who voluntarily left a satellite campus between 2021 and 2025. A hybrid thematic analysis revealed the systematic frustration of all three basic psychological needs. Autonomy was eroded through centralized decision-making and limited workplace flexibility. Competence was frustrated by inadequate training, stalled career progression, and monotonous tasks. Relatedness was weakened by isolation, communication barriers, and geographic distance from the main campus. Three emergent constructs, asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, explain how institutional design concentrates decision-making authority at the main campus while rendering satellite staff organizationally invisible, producing the structural conditions for need frustration that individual managerial interventions cannot address.

The subsequent phase utilized a cross-sectional quantitative design with validated instruments including the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale, Maslach Burnout Inventory, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Organizational Career Growth Scale, Work–Life Balance Scale, and Turnover Intention Scale with administrative staff ($N = 447$). Contrary to

expectations, satellite and main campus staff did not differ significantly in need satisfaction, need frustration, or turnover intention, suggesting that need thwarting operates institution-wide rather than as a satellite-specific phenomenon. Hierarchical regression indicated that both need satisfaction ($\beta = -.372$, $p < .001$) and need frustration ($\beta = .339$, $p < .001$) emerged as significant independent predictors of turnover intention in the final model, with need frustration explaining incremental variance beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). Overall need satisfaction showed the strongest negative correlation with turnover intention ($r = -.603$), while lack of career development showed the strongest positive association among stressors ($r = .68$). Parallel mediation analyses indicated that organizational stressors influenced turnover intention through both need satisfaction and need frustration; however, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models, supporting a pattern of differential rather than equivalent mediation. Overall, findings support a dual-process framework in which both reduced need support and active need thwarting contribute independently to turnover intention.

The final phase provided a theory-informed assessment of an institutional well-being program using the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS) to evaluate alignment with SDT principles. Documentary analysis of program materials and public-facing web pages, combined with administrator interviews, established that the program received a TCS score of 2 out of 19 indicators, substantially below the average for occupational health interventions. A practitioner-led design philosophy grounded in the SAMHSA 8 Dimensions content taxonomy rather than behavior change theory, combined with a centralized oneness mandate producing uniform delivery across all campus locations, explains why the program's functional maturity has not translated into theoretical alignment with the psychological conditions driving turnover. The

program functions as a thermometer rather than a treatment, monitoring individual well-being through participation metrics and health claims data without engaging the structural conditions that produce need frustration.

Collectively, this multi-phase case study extends SDT to an understudied population and organizational context, providing empirical evidence that satellite campus structures systematically affect psychological need satisfaction through identifiable structural mechanisms. The findings demonstrate that need frustration, not merely need dissatisfaction, is the primary driver of administrative staff turnover, and that this mechanism operates institution-wide rather than exclusively at the satellite level. Current institutional wellness programming, assessed against the Theory Coding Scheme, addresses individual symptoms rather than the structural conditions responsible for departure. These results provide institutions with an empirical foundation and theoretical framework for building psychologically supportive administrative environments that reduce turnover costs and sustain the student-facing services that satellite campuses exist to provide.

Introduction

Administrative staff make up about 80% of the higher education workforce and are essential to the successful operation of institutions across administrative, managerial, and technical areas (Weinstein Jr., 2023). These professionals support critical institutional functions like academic affairs, enrollment management, human resources, and financial aid. Despite their importance to institutional stability, the administrative workforce has experienced considerable change in recent years. Between 2013 and 2021, turnover among administrative staff reached 20%, before declining to 16% in the post-COVID period (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2024; Higher Education Publications, Inc., 2023). High attrition rates present significant challenges to higher education institutions including the disruption of academic and administrative services, the increased workloads for remaining employees, and the erosion of valuable institutional knowledge (Bishel et al., 2023; Jackson, 2023). Moreover, the financial and operational demands associated with recruiting and training new employees created further challenges and placed increased strain on resources (Shaw & Shryock, 2024; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). For example, a 2024 training industry report found that large organizations (with 10,000 or more employees) allocate an average of $13.3 million annually to training, with each individual costing about $398 to train (Freifeld, 2024).

Addressing this problem is especially important on satellite campuses that increasingly serve as critical access points for higher education. This is true for nontraditional, first-generation, and geographically dispersed student populations (Decker, 2025; Deloitte, 2025). The stability of administrative staff on these campuses not only affects institutional operations but also shapes the quality of student support services, retention outcomes, and overall student experiences between main and a satellite campus (Fraser & Stott, 2015). In such settings, the

departure of even a single staff member can significantly disrupt student services and essential operations (College and University Professional Association for Human Resources, 2024).

Although administrative staff are crucial to the stability and functionality of higher education institutions, empirical research on the causes and consequences of their turnover remains surprisingly scarce, especially when compared to extensive faculty studies (Jo, 2008; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). Existing literature on employee retention has focused on faculty and student populations, overlooking non-instructional staff. Those studies also emphasize main campuses, with satellite campuses being excluded from analysis, which leaves us with little understanding of the unique challenges and turnover dynamics these staff face. This study directly tackles that critical gap, motivated by a concrete institutional observation: during a five-year tenure at a satellite campus, four successive HR business leads departed within a compressed timeframe, a localized pattern that raised a foundational question the existing literature could not answer, whether the structural conditions of satellite campus design, centralized governance, geographic isolation, and limited resources, systematically produce the psychological conditions driving administrative staff to leave.

Purpose of the Study

This mixed-methods comprehensive case study investigates the factors driving administrative staff turnover in higher education through three interrelated papers. The study has three related purposes: (1) to explore how former administrative staff at a satellite campus describe the structural and psychological conditions that influenced their decision to leave; (2) to examine whether satellite and main campus staff differ in psychological need satisfaction and frustration, and to quantify how organizational factors shape those relationships relative to turnover intention; and (3) to assess the alignment of an existing institutional wellness program

with the basic psychological needs, as outlined by Self-Determination Theory (SDT).

Overarching Research Question

What psychological and organizational conditions drive administrative staff turnover at a higher education satellite campus, and how well do current institutional retention strategies address them? This overarching question is examined through three interrelated papers, each with its own research question that builds sequentially on the one before it.

Study 1 asks: *How do former administrative professionals at a higher education satellite campus describe the factors that influenced their decision to leave?* This qualitative case study explores the lived experiences of departed staff to identify the structural and psychological drivers of voluntary turnover, producing the foundational constructs, asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, which anchor the subsequent phases.

Study 2 asks: *Do satellite and main campus administrative staff differ in their levels of psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention, and to what extent do psychological needs predict turnover intention when controlling for organizational and demographic factors?* This cross-sectional quantitative study tests whether the conditions identified in Study 1 hold across a broader staff population ($N = 447$) and quantifies the relative contributions of need frustration and need satisfaction to turnover intention, identifying autonomy deprivation and lack of career development as the strongest structural predictors of administrative staff departure.

Study 3 asks: *To what extent does the institutional wellness program address the specific organizational factors and psychological needs, identified in Papers 1 and 2, that influence administrative staff turnover at satellite campuses?* This theory-informed assessment uses the Theory Coding Scheme to evaluate whether the institution's existing well-being program is

actually designed to address the psychological conditions the first two studies identified as driving staff to leave.

Guided by Self-Determination Theory, these three questions collectively build a diagnostic sequence that moves from understanding *why* staff leave, to measuring *how widespread* those conditions are, to evaluating *whether* the institution's current response adequately addresses them.

Theoretical Framework

Several theoretical frameworks have been applied to employee turnover in organizational and higher education contexts, each offering partial explanatory value. Job Demands-Resources (JD-R) Theory states that turnover results from an imbalance between workplace demands and available resources, with burnout as the primary mediating mechanism (Bakker & Demerouti, 2017). While JD-R effectively models workload-driven exhaustion, it treats burnout as an originating stressor rather than a downstream consequence of unmet psychological needs, limiting its capacity to explain *why* certain organizational conditions deplete motivation at a structural level. Organizational Commitment Theory frames turnover as a function of employees' affective, normative, and continuance bonds to the institution (Meyer & Allen, 1991), but it describes the decision to leave without theorizing the psychological mechanisms that erode commitment over time. Person-Environment Fit Theory explains turnover as a mismatch between individual characteristics and organizational context (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005), which is conceptually aligned with this study's focus, but it lacks the specificity to identify which psychological conditions are being mismatched and how organizational structures produce that misalignment. SDT, and specifically its Basic Psychological Needs Theory, addresses these limitations directly. Rather than treating turnover as a product of workload imbalance, attitudinal

erosion, or general misfit, SDT locates the mechanism of turnover in how organizational structures systematically frustrate three universal psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This exactness makes SDT uniquely suited to examining satellite campus turnover, where the structural conditions of geographic isolation, centralized decision-making, and limited resources create identifiable and theoretically predictable patterns of need frustration.

Formally established by Deci and Ryan (1985) in "*Intrinsic Motivation and Self-Determination in Human Behavior*", SDT has evolved over the last four decades. In 2000, the theory expanded to include the definition of need satisfaction versus need frustration, recognizing that psychological needs can be actively thwarted rather than simply unmet (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Gagné and Deci's (2005) application of SDT to organizational settings showed how workplace environments can either support or undermine these basic needs, directly influencing employee motivation, performance, and well-being.

Theoretical Development and Evolution

SDT evolved from a basic motivation theory to a comprehensive organizational framework through six interconnected mini theories (Ryan & Deci, 2020). Cognitive Evaluation Theory examines autonomy and competence as sources of motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1980). Organismic Integration Theory explains how individuals internalize external regulations, moving from external control towards autonomous motivation (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Causality Orientations Theory describes individual differences in how people interpret and respond to social environments (Deci & Ryan, 1985). Goals Contents Theory reveals there can be differences in need satisfaction based on lifestyles and goals (Kasser & Ryan, 1996). Basic Psychological Needs Theory explores how need satisfaction and frustration shape well-being

(Ryan & Deci, 2000). Relationship Motivation Theory demonstrates how interpersonal needs work through empirical data (Deci & Ryan, 2014).

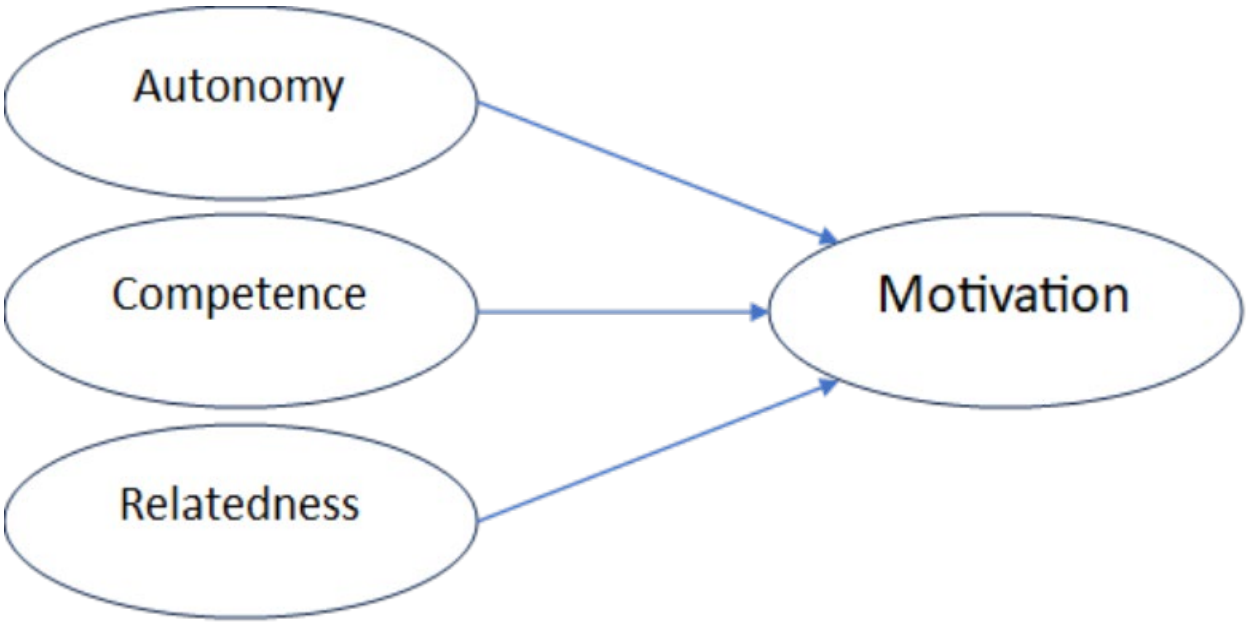
Together, these six mini-theories expanded SDT from a basic motivation framework into a comprehensive account of how social environments shape human behavior across individual, relational, and organizational levels. While five of the theories address individual-level processes such as how rewards affect motivation, how regulations are internalized, how personal goals relate to well-being, no one directly theorizes how organizational environments produce the conditions for psychological need frustration that this dissertation examines. Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT) is the operative framework here because it alone directly theorizes how organizational environments satisfy or frustrate the universal needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, and links those conditions to motivation, well-being, and outcomes such as turnover intention (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Basic Psychological Needs Theory

The Basic Psychological Needs Theory explains human motivation, psychological growth, and well-being through three fundamental psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As **Figure 1** illustrates, these needs directly feed into motivation. Autonomy refers to experiencing choice and volition in one's actions; competence involves feeling effective in mastering tasks; and relatedness means forming connections with others. When these needs are satisfied, people exhibit greater intrinsic motivation, engagement, and well-being. When frustrated, however, they can experience diminished motivation and poorer outcomes.

Figure 1

Basic Psychological Needs



Note. Components of Self-Determination Theory

Organizational applications to SDT show how workplace conditions can influence employees' psychological need satisfaction. Supported environments such as autonomy-supported supervision, skill development foster, and collaborative team dynamics foster need satisfaction, enhanced motivation, and job satisfaction. On the other hand, need-frustrated conditions such as micromanagement, role ambiguity, or social isolation undermine psychological well-being. This may lead to employee disengagement, reduced performance, and turnover intentions. Understanding these dynamics in specific organizational settings is essential to design psychologically informed retention strategies.

While SDT was originally developed to explain individual motivation processes, specifically how the social environment influences internalization and well-being at the personal level, subsequent scholarship extended the framework to organizational contexts. Gagné and Deci (2005) demonstrated that workplace structures function as the social environment SDT describes, either supporting or undermining employees' basic psychological needs through

management practices, organizational policies, and institutional design. Deci, Olafsen, and Ryan (2017) further established that need frustration in organizational settings is largely a structural outcome, produced not by individual psychological deficits but by the institutional conditions employees navigate daily. This distinction is critical for the present dissertation, which operates at the organizational level of analysis. Rather than examining whether individual administrators have achieved autonomous motivation, this study examines whether the institutional structures of a satellite campus systematically produce the conditions for need frustration, a distinction that positions institutional design, not individual behavior, as the appropriate target for the policy and practice recommendations that follow.

Relevance to Higher Education Administrative Staff

SDT is particularly relevant for understanding administrative staff experiences in higher education, where unique organizational dynamics systematically challenge psychological need satisfaction. On a satellite campus, staff often face autonomy constraints from centralized decision-making structures and limited local authority. Competence needs suffer from unclear roles, limited professional development opportunities, and resource constraints. Relatedness can be compromised by smaller professional communities, geographical isolation from the main campus, and hierarchical distinctions between academic and administrative personnel. These conditions do not frustrate psychological needs incidentally; they do so structurally, which is precisely what SDT's organizational framework is designed to theorize and measure.

SDT's capacity to examine both need satisfaction and need frustration, rather than treating motivation as a simple binary, makes it uniquely suited to generating the kind of structural, institutionally actionable recommendations that surface-level engagement surveys cannot produce. Where satisfaction-only frameworks identify what is missing, SDT's frustration

construct identifies what is actively harming motivation, a distinction with direct implications for retention policy.

When need frustration is chronic, its most visible organizational consequence is burnout. Within the SDT framework, burnout is not treated as an independent stressor but as a downstream consequence of persistent need thwarting, the psychological exhaustion that results when autonomy is controlled rather than supported, competence is blocked rather than developed, and relatedness is eroded rather than cultivated (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). This interpretation differs meaningfully from stress-based models such as Job Demands-Resources, which treats burnout primarily as a product of workload imbalance. From an SDT perspective, burnout signals that the organizational environment has systematically depleted the psychological resources employees need to sustain motivation and engagement. In this dissertation, burnout is included not as a parallel predictor of turnover but as an amplifying mechanism, a structural indicator that need frustration has reached a threshold sufficient to exhaust intrinsic motivation and accelerate the decision to leave.

Unifying Framework

SDT provides theoretical coherence across the dissertation's three-paper design by functioning simultaneously as an exploratory lens, a measurement framework, and an evaluative standard. Study 1 employs SDT constructs to guide interview protocols that surface the psychological need experiences driving former staff departures. Study 2 applies validated SDT instruments to measure need satisfaction and frustration among current staff and quantify their relationship to turnover intention. Study 3 uses SDT principles as evaluative criteria to assess whether the institution's existing wellness program addresses the conditions the prior two studies identified as most responsible for administrative exit. Together, the three papers constitute a

diagnostic sequence: from lived experience, to population-level measurement, to program evaluation. Throughout SDT's core proposition, that organizational structures either support or frustrate the psychological needs essential for sustained motivation, provides the unifying thread. The institutional and organizational context within which these psychological dynamics operate is examined in the following section.

Context of Study

Administrative Staff

Administrative staff are the employees who plan, organize, direct, control, and oversee a college or university's operations and services but are distinct from faculty or academic roles (American Society of Administrative Professionals, 2025). At a university, these positions span executive/administrative/managerial, support and service professionals, clerical and secretarial, technical, and paraprofessional, skilled crafts, and service and maintenance. They play essential roles in academic affairs, financial services, student affairs, financial aid, advising, and student records management (American Society of Administrative Professionals, 2025). Their expertise enables faculty to focus on teaching and research, while allowing students to concentrate on learning. Often working behind the scenes, administrative staff bridge students, faculty, and other external partners, to maintain the infrastructure that supports the institution's academic mission. Understanding what drives these professionals to leave requires situating their experiences within the broader workforce disruptions that reshaped employee expectations across higher education beginning in 2020.

Post-Pandemic Context and Great Resignation

The COVID-19 pandemic inverted in-person higher education in spring 2020, forcing campuses into remote operations for months (Wang & Sun, 2022). This gave administrative staff

time to reassess career and life priorities (Gamede et al., 2022; Mishra et al., 2020; Purcell & Lumbreras, 2021). While many focused on physical and mental health (Barche et al., 2022), stress levels rose due to lingering uncertainties about health risks and job security (Filho et al., 2024). As restrictions eased, hybrid and remote work models reshaped expectations, offering new flexibility in when and how work happened (Gensler, 2023).

The "Great Resignation" of 2021-2022 saw employees leave for roles better matching their evolving priorities (Tessema et al., 2022). Organizations lost talent and institutional knowledge as the job market grew more fluid with resignations and retirements. This mindset shift lingers, challenging organizations to realign with employee expectations around flexibility, purpose, and well-being. In student affairs specifically, the pandemic amplified existing turnover pressures (Cohen, 2021). Earley's (2023) study found that professionals already considering departure faced heightened concerns during COVID about poor leadership, role misalignment with personal purpose, lack of professional development and growth opportunities, and work–life imbalance (Marshall et al., 2016). These conditions map directly onto the psychological need frustrations that SDT predicts drive disengagement and departure. These pressures were not distributed evenly across institutional contexts, for administrative staff at satellite campuses, the structural conditions of geographic isolation, centralized decision-making, and limited resources amplified each of these frustrations in ways that main campus staff were less likely to experience.

Satellite Campus

While the Higher Learning Commission (2024) defines a satellite campus as a geographically separate entity, it is better understood as a bridge to the main institution. By design, these locations function as an extension with a smaller physical footprint, fewer

personnel, and reduced educational offerings, yet this streamlined nature is exactly what allows them to be so effective. They bring the university brand to students who might otherwise be priced out or boxed out by distance, creating local educational pathways that drive both individual success and regional economic growth (Rossi & Goglio, 2018).

However, this model introduces distinct operational pressures. Since satellite campuses often maintain a limited academic scope, sometimes offering only degree completion programs, the administrative burden falls on a smaller team (Shaw & Shryock, 2024). In these environments, staff members frequently function as "one-person departments," juggling a multitude of roles that carry higher levels of complexity and broader expectations than their main-campus counterparts (Wolfe & Strange, 2003). These unique stressors make the study of staff turnover at satellite campuses critical, as institutional stability and student support relieve a small, highly strained group of individuals. At the focal satellite campus in this study, fewer than 200 full-time administrative staff serve approximately 1,000 students across more than 30 programs, located approximately 140 miles from the main campus, a context in which the departure of even a single staff member can cascade across multiple functional areas.

One Pair

This study examines one main campus-satellite campus pair within a single R1 research university precisely because this configuration concentrates the structural conditions just described, centralized governance, resource asymmetry, and geographic distance, into a bounded and analytically tractable context (Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education, 2025). This bounded case enables rich, contextually grounded analysis of administrative staff turnover through Self-Determination Theory's lens of autonomy, competence, and relatedness. R1 universities feature distinctive administrative structures, funding patterns, and work cultures

shaped by research intensity (Merriam, 2009). The satellite campus shares the same institutional brand and governance structure as its main campus counterpart but differs in scale, distance from central leadership, and resource availability. This research design prioritizes depth over breadth, appropriate for a comprehensive case design aiming to generate nuanced insights rather than broad generalizations (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The R1 context ensures theoretical and practical significance while acknowledging that findings may differ in less research-intensive settings. This focus on a single institutional pair limits generalizability but enables the depth of analysis necessary to identify the specific structural and psychological mechanisms driving administrative staff turnover, mechanisms that broader survey designs are unlikely to surface.

Limitations

This dissertation carries several cross-cutting limitations that readers should consider when interpreting the findings.

First, the study is bounded to a single R1 university and one main campus-satellite campus pair. While this design enables contextually rich, theoretically grounded analysis, findings may not transfer directly to administrative staff at community colleges, regional universities, or institutions with different governance structures, resource profiles, or campus relationships.

Second, data collection occurred in the post-pandemic period, a moment characterized by heightened labor market volatility and shifting employee expectations associated with the Great Resignation. While this context is theoretically relevant to the study's questions, it introduces the possibility that observed patterns of need frustration and turnover intention reflect a period-specific phenomenon rather than stable organizational conditions, and longitudinal replication will be necessary to assess the durability of these findings.

Third, both the qualitative and quantitative phases of this research rely on participant self-report. In Study 1, retrospective interview accounts of former staff are subject to recall bias and post-exit reframing of workplace experiences. In Study 2, survey responses measuring psychological need satisfaction and frustration may be influenced by social desirability, particularly among current employees.

Fourth, the cross-sectional design of Study 2 captures a single point in time and cannot establish causal directionality between psychological need frustration and turnover intention, only the presence and strength of their association. Campus comparison analyses were constrained by subgroup size; a post-hoc power analysis established that the minimum detectable effect size at 80% power was $d = .41$, a limitation addressed fully in Study 2. More detailed methodological limitations specific to each paper's design, sample, and analytic approach are addressed in their respective discussions.

Fifth, the theory-informed assessment in Study 3 relies on institutional program documentation and administrator interviews rather than participant-level data from staff who engage with the program directly. These sources establish what the program is designed to do and how administrators understand its implementation, but they cannot capture how staff experience the program or whether participation produces changes in psychological need satisfaction over time. Additionally, TCS scores are sensitive to the evidentiary scope of the assessment, an evaluation based on vendor documentation would yield a different score than one grounded in institution-specific implementation materials and administrator accounts. This study deliberately assessed the latter, as the research question concerns whether this institution's program addresses the conditions driving turnover, a question that generic platform documentation cannot answer. Readers should interpret the Study 3 findings as a diagnostic

assessment of program design intent rather than a comprehensive evaluation of program impact.

Significance of Study

This research makes three distinct contributions to higher education scholarship by bridging the gap between institutional operational stability and the psychological drivers of employee retention.

First, it establishes the psychological mechanism behind operational disruption. While existing literature focuses on the costs of turnover, this study extends Self-Determination Theory (SDT) to administrative staff to demonstrate *why* these costs occur. By generating empirical evidence of how satellite campus structures, characterized by geographic isolation and "forced generalism", systematically thwart basic psychological needs, this research identifies "need frustration" as the root cause of the service disruptions and knowledge loss that threaten institutional continuity.

Second, it provides a validated *Theory of Change* for administrative retention. By employing an exploratory sequential mixed-methods design, the study moves beyond surface-level satisfaction metrics to produce theoretically grounded, empirically tested constructs. By demonstrating that need frustration explains significant incremental variance in turnover intentions ($\Delta R^2 = .061$) beyond mere satisfaction, this research provides the conceptual foundation for a new generation of validated measurement instruments. These tools allow multi-campus systems to move from "monitoring" employee well-being to "treating" the structural conditions that drive attrition.

Third, it redirects scholarly attention toward the *Operational Frontier* of the workforce. While non-instructional staff comprise roughly 80% of the higher education workforce, they remain largely absent from retention literature dominated by faculty-centric models. This

research centers this vital population, proving that the *Oneness Mandate* of centralized systems often creates an *asymmetric power dynamic* that undermines the autonomy and competence of front-line staff. In doing so, this study opens new lines of inquiry into how post-pandemic workforce dynamics and structural determinants shape the well-being of the professionals who maintain the university's critical infrastructure.

Practical Value for Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

The findings of this dissertation translate directly into actionable guidance for educational leaders and policymakers working to address administrative staff turnover. Three structural leverage points emerge that institutions can target without large resource investments: fostering autonomy through decentralized decision-making that grants satellite staff meaningful local authority; supporting competence through targeted professional development and transparent career pathways; and strengthening relatedness through intentional communication structures that bridge the geographic distance between satellite and main campuses. High administrative turnover disrupts student services, financial aid, academic support, and institutional continuity; consequences that are amplified at satellite locations where single-staff departments absorb the full operational impact of attrition. The integrated recommendations developed across the three papers provide administrators with a coordinated, SDT-informed blueprint for building stable and psychologically supportive administrative environments that reduce turnover costs and sustain the student-facing services that satellite campuses exist to provide.

Executive Summary of Studies

Multi-Phase Exploratory Sequential Mixed Methods Design

This comprehensive case study employs an exploratory sequential design to examine administrative staff turnover at a higher education satellite campus through Self-Determination

Theory. The three-paper approach systematically builds understanding from individual experiences to organizational interventions, providing actionable retention insights.

Study 1 – Qualitative Case Study

This qualitative case study draws on semi-structured interviews with nine former administrative staff who voluntarily departed a higher education satellite campus between 2021 and 2025. Using hybrid thematic analysis, the study examined how participants described the structural and psychological conditions driving their departure. Findings revealed the systematic frustration of all three basic psychological needs: autonomy was eroded through centralized control and limited flexibility, competence was frustrated by insufficient training and stalled career progression, and relatedness was weakened by geographic isolation and institutional disconnection from the main campus. Three emergent constructs, asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, explain how institutional design systematically produces need frustration in satellite campus contexts in ways that standardized surveys are unlikely to detect. A contrasting case in which one department's structural independence appeared to buffer against need frustration provides preliminary evidence that localized autonomy functions as a protective condition against need thwarting in centralized multi-campus systems. These constructs and findings provided the conceptual foundation and variable selection rationale for Study 2.

Study 2 – Cross-Sectional Quantitative Study

This cross-sectional quantitative study addressed two research questions. RQ1 tested whether satellite and main campus administrative staff differ in psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention. RQ2 examined the extent to which psychological need frustration and organizational stressors predict turnover intention among administrative staff

when controlling for demographic and contextual variables. Validated instruments included the Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale, Maslach Burnout Inventory, Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire, Organizational Career Growth Scale, Work–Life Balance Scale, and Turnover Intention Scale across a sample of $N = 447$ administrative staff. Contrary to expectations, satellite and main campus staff did not differ significantly in need satisfaction, need frustration, or turnover intention, indicating that need thwarting operates institution-wide rather than as a satellite-specific phenomenon. Hierarchical regression indicated that need satisfaction ($\beta = -.372$, $p < .001$) and need frustration ($\beta = .339$, $p < .001$) both emerged as significant independent predictors of turnover intention in the final model, with need frustration explaining significant incremental variance beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). The progressive attenuation of demographic predictors across model steps further supports SDT's universality argument, suggesting that turnover intention is driven primarily by psychological need conditions rather than individual characteristics. Parallel mediation analyses confirmed that organizational stressors, burnout, ineffective leadership, lack of career development, and work–life imbalance, influenced turnover intention through both need satisfaction and need frustration as parallel pathways; however, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models, supporting a pattern of differential rather than equivalent mediation. These findings provide the empirical grounding for the program assessment criteria applied in Study 3.

Study 3 – Theory-informed assessment Study

Using the Theory Coding Scheme (Michie & Prestwich, 2010) with SDT as the evaluative framework, this study assesses whether the institution's existing wellness program is designed to address the psychological conditions Studies 1 and 2 identified as most responsible

for administrative staff departure. Documentary analysis of program materials and public-facing web pages, combined with semi-structured interviews with program administrators, provided the evidentiary basis for systematic TCS coding. The program received a TCS score of 2 out of 19 indicators, reflecting minimal explicit theoretical grounding. A practitioner-led design philosophy grounded in the SAMHSA 8 Dimensions content taxonomy rather than behavior change theory, combined with a centralized delivery mandate producing uniform programming across all campus locations, explains why the program's functional maturity has not translated into alignment with the specific psychological conditions driving turnover. The assessment establishes that the program functions as a thermometer rather than a treatment, monitoring individual well-being without engaging the structural conditions that produce need frustration, and produces evidence-based recommendations for structural realignment grounded in the empirical findings of the prior two studies.

Table 1 illustrates the systematic integration across the three-paper design. Each row maps a major theme from Study 1's qualitative exploration to its corresponding SDT construct, the quantitative measure used in Study 2, and the assessment criteria applied in Study 3. This sequential structure ensures that the quantitative measures directly test the qualitatively identified themes, and that the theory-informed assessment evaluates whether the institution's existing program addresses the psychological conditions empirically shown to drive turnover.

Table 1
Integration of Findings, Measures, and Assessment Across Studies

Study 1 Qualitative Findings	**SDT Construct**	**Study 2 Quantitative Measure**	**Study 3 Program Assessment**

Centralized Control & Asymmetric Power	Frustrated Autonomy	BPNSFS Autonomy Frustration (Campus Comparison)	TCS Items 4-6 Choice, Autonomy Support & Voice
Career Stagnation & Forced Generalism	Frustrated Competence	BPNSFS Competence Frustration + Organizational Career Goals (Campus Comparison)	TCS Items 7-11 Skill-building & Professional Development
Isolation & "Benign Neglect"	Frustrated Relatedness	BPNSFS Relatedness Frustration (Campus Comparison)	TCS Items 10-11 Social opportunities & Inclusive Design
Organizational stressors (Leadership Structure, Extrinsic)	Amplifiers of Need Thwarting	MBI+MLQ+OCGS+WLB	TCS Items 1-3 Program Theory

Note. SDT = Self-Determination Theory; BPNSFS = Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale; TCS = Theory Coding Scheme; MLQ = Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire; MBI = Maslach Burnout Inventory; OCGS = Organizational Career Goals Scale; WLB = Work-Life Balance Scale. Study 2 additionally assessed burnout (MBI), leadership effectiveness (MLQ), career goal support (OCGS), and work-life balance (WLB) as organizational-level predictors of turnover intention. Organizational stressors including leadership failure, structural resource deficits, and extrinsic factors emerged as amplifying conditions in Study 1 and are operationalized through the MLQ and Work-Life Balance Scale in Study 2.

Integration and Outcomes

This three-paper dissertation builds a coherent, exploratory sequential mixed-methods program of research that connects administrative staff experiences, psychological need processes, and institutional interventions. Rather than functioning as three disparate studies, this work operates as a diagnostic sequence: The qualitative phase identifies the "mechanisms" of turnover, The quantitative phase maps their prevalence across the university system, and the program assessment evaluates the "antidote" currently provided by the institution.

Analytical Synthesis of Findings

The integration of these studies reveals a complex organizational landscape in which qualitative contextual insights and quantitative structural patterns both converge and extend one

another. Study 1 identified localized experiences of need thwarting as a key driver of staff exit, while Study 2 confirmed the theoretical significance of these findings, demonstrating that need frustration is a significant predictor of turnover intention ($\beta = .339$, $p < .001$) and explains incremental variance beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). Within the regression models, autonomy also emerged as a strong negative predictor of turnover intention, highlighting the central role of perceived agency in shaping withdrawal intentions.

Parallel mediation analyses further indicated that organizational stressors transmit their effects on turnover intention through both need satisfaction and need frustration. However, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models, as indicated by significant contrast effects, supporting a pattern of differential mediation rather than equivalence. This suggests a dual-process structure in which both reduced need support and active need thwarting contribute to turnover processes, although the latter represents the dominant pathway.

Study 2 also revealed no significant differences in need satisfaction, need frustration, or turnover intention across campus locations, suggesting that the magnitude of turnover risk is institution-wide, while Study 1 highlights that the contextual expression of need thwarting may differ across organizational settings. When the results are combined, it shows that standardized survey measures may obscure important contextual nuances captured in qualitative accounts.

The combined findings of Studies 1 and 2 informed the evaluative criteria applied in Study 3, ensuring that program assessment was grounded in empirically identified psychological drivers of turnover. That assessment revealed a program that is structurally consistent and equitably delivered across campus locations but scored 2 out of 19 on the Theory Coding Scheme, indicating limited explicit engagement with autonomy, competence, and relatedness

processes identified as central in the preceding studies. The resulting gap between the psychological drivers of turnover and the institution's retention strategy represents the central problem addressed in this dissertation, and the basis for its integrated recommendations.

Levels of Integration

Across the three studies, integration occurs at three distinct levels. Conceptually, Self-Determination Theory provides the connective tissue linking staff narratives of "feeling like a cog" in Study 1 to quantitative measures of autonomy frustration in Study 2 and the systematic TCS coding of wellness documents in Study 3, functioning simultaneously as an exploratory lens, a measurement framework, and an evaluative standard. Methodologically, following an exploratory sequential logic, the qualitative themes in Study 1 directly informed the selection of validated instruments in Study 2. In turn, the combined empirical findings of the first two studies, specifically need satisfaction emerging as the strongest negative predictor of turnover intention ($\beta = -.601$, prior to controlling for need frustration), with overall need satisfaction showing the strongest association among primary study variables ($r = -.603$) and career goal stagnation as the leading organizational stressor ($r = .68$), established the SDT-based evaluative criteria applied in Study 3. This ensured the program assessment was grounded in the specific psychological conditions most responsible for administrative departure at this institution rather than generic wellness theory. Practically, the dissertation culminates in an Integrated Triad for Systemic Change that draws on all three papers: the contextual mechanisms from Study 1, the predictive metrics from Study 2, and the diagnostic assessment from Study 3 together provide a blueprint for interventions that are theoretically grounded and operationally specific, repositioning participation data as a diagnostic hub for structural reform rather than a standalone retention solution.

Answering the Overarching Research Question

Taken together, these findings answer the overarching research question by demonstrating that administrative staff turnover is not a product of individual burnout or personal disengagement, but a structural outcome of institutional environments that systematically frustrate the psychological needs essential for sustained motivation. The integration across three studies reveals that the institution's existing wellness program, assessed against the Theory Coding Scheme and found to score 2 out of 19 indicators of explicit theoretical grounding, addresses general well-being without engaging the specific conditions, constrained autonomy, foreclosed career development, and organizational invisibility, that the first two studies identify as the primary drivers of administrative exit. The program functions as a thermometer rather than a treatment: it monitors individual well-being through participation metrics and health claims data while remaining structurally silent on the organizational conditions that produce need frustration in the first place. Retaining administrative staff, particularly at satellite campuses, therefore requires not wellness programming alone but a fundamental reorientation of institutional design, one that distributes decision-making authority, builds visible career pathways, and closes the structural distance between satellite staff and the institutional center. The Integrated Triad for Systemic Change proposed in the synthesis chapter provides the empirical foundation and theoretical framework for that reorientation, translating the converging findings of all three studies into actionable institutional guidance.

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Beyond the Main Campus: Identifying Foundational Constructs for Administrative Retention in Satellite Environments

Abstract

While there is extensive research on faculty turnover in higher education, administrative professional turnover at satellite campuses remains understudied. This qualitative case study investigates the structural and psychological drivers of voluntary turnover among administrative professionals at a satellite campus in the post-COVID era using Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as its guiding lens. Data were collected through in-depth interviews with nine former administrative professionals and analyzed using a hybrid thematic analysis. Findings reveal the systematic frustration of all three basic psychological needs: autonomy was undermined through centralized control and limited flexibility; competence was frustrated by insufficient training and stalled professional growth; and relatedness was eroded through geographic isolation and a pervasive sense of benign neglect from the main campus. Notably, one contrasting case in which a department maintained structural independence appeared to buffer against need frustration, suggesting localized autonomy may function as a protective condition. These insights highlight the role of asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect in fostering amotivation and provide the foundational constructs necessary for the development of context-specific retention strategies in multi-campus systems.

Introduction

Despite comprising roughly 80% of the higher education workforce, administrative professionals remain conspicuously absent from the retention literature. Faculty turnover has generated substantial scholarly attention, yet the staff who sustain day-to-day institutional operations, managing financial aid, advising students, coordinating academic services, have received comparatively little systematic study (Jo, 2008; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018). This gap is consequential. Nationally, administrative staff turnover reached 20% between 2013 and 2021 before moderating to 16% post-COVID, and the costs of that attrition, retraining, institutional knowledge loss, and operational disruption, fall disproportionately on the institutions least equipped to absorb them (CUPA-HR, 2024; Shaw & Shryock, 2024).

Those institutions are satellite campuses. Defined as extensions of a main campus with a smaller physical footprint, fewer personnel, and a reduced range of educational offerings, satellite campuses operate with constrained staffing and limited institutional support, conditions that amplify the impact of every departure (Jackson, 2023; Wolfe & Strange, 2003). Yet no peer-reviewed research has examined whether the disengagement and burnout dynamics commonly linked to voluntary turnover in other organizational contexts operate similarly among administrative professionals in satellite settings (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010). This leaves a critical gap in both theory and practice, one this study addresses through the following research question: *How do former administrative professionals at a higher education satellite campus describe the factors that influenced their decision to leave?*

To examine this question, the study applies Self-Determination Theory (SDT), which identifies the frustration of three universal needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, by organizational structures as the primary psychological mechanism driving turnover (Deci et al.,

2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). SDT is particularly suited to this context because it theorizes not merely whether employees are dissatisfied, but whether the institutional environment is actively thwarting the psychological conditions necessary for sustained motivation, a distinction with direct implications for understanding why satellite campus staff leave and what institutions must structurally change to retain them.

Literature Review

This literature review examines two bodies of research relevant to administrative staff turnover: workplace demotivation and burnout, and organizational factors including leadership, compensation, career advancement, and work-life balance. Together these streams establish the contextual foundation for applying Self-Determination Theory to satellite campus turnover.

Research in Work Demotivation and Turnover

Administrative professionals are conspicuously absent from the higher education turnover literature, which concentrates predominantly on faculty and student affairs professionals rather than the non-instructional staff who sustain daily institutional operations (Gardner, 2012; Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018; Wilson et al., 2016). This gap is significant because administrative staff encounter many of the same demotivating conditions documented in adjacent populations, disengagement, burnout, workload strain, and limited growth opportunities, yet the mechanisms through which these conditions drive their turnover decisions remain empirically underexamined (Bichsel et al., 2023; Jo, 2008; Pelletier, 2010).

Employee disengagement is among the most consistently documented precursors to turnover intention, associated with lower performance, reduced productivity, and diminished well-being across organizational contexts (Afrahi et al., 2022; Baker, 2014; Prencipe, 2001; Tritch, 2001). Recent studies have identified workplace stress and technostress as significant

contributors to employee disengagement, intensifying risks such as burnout and turnover (Afrahi et al., 2022; Winfield & Paris, 2022). Workplace stress arises when employees are overwhelmed by excessive workloads and competing demands, while technostress occurs from an inability to effectively cope with the growing number of digital tools and technology in the workplace. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, these pressures have intensified the connection between disengagement and burnout, and turnover has become more pronounced (Winfield & Paris, 2022).

Burnout often develops when high job demands are paired with insufficient resources, leading to gradual disengagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Russell et al., 2020). Additionally, burnout can erode motivation, undermining employees' sense of competence, furthering the likelihood of turnover. Studies have identified several contributing factors to burnout, including work overload, role-conflict, and role ambiguity (Bakker & Costa, 2014; Burke & Greenglass, 1995; Kyriacou, 1987). Within higher education, a sizable portion of turnover literature has been focused on student affairs professionals, which shows how job stress and burnout can lead to turnover (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al, 2018; Wilson et al., 2016). However, broader implications remain unexplored such as financial costs to an organization for replacement or the time investment to train a new employee (Sabagh et al., 2018; Wright, 2021). What the burnout literature leaves undertheorized, however, is the organizational source of the conditions that generate it, the structural arrangements of leadership, compensation, career development, and institutional culture that either sustain or deplete the psychological resources employees need to remain engaged.

Research in Organizational Factors and Turnover

The organizational conditions that structure daily work, leadership practices,

compensation equity, career development opportunities, and work arrangement flexibility, are among the most consistently documented predictors of employee motivation and voluntary turnover in higher education (Davis et al., 2022; Heffernan & McKay, 2018; Jo, 2008; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). For administrative staff, these conditions carry particular weight because they operate within institutional hierarchies that concentrate decision-making authority away from the staff most affected by it, a structural dynamic that, through an SDT lens, represents a systemic source of autonomy frustration rather than an incidental feature of organizational life.

Toxic leadership is a significant and well-documented contributor to voluntary turnover, operating through the misuse of positional power in ways that create psychologically unsafe work environments (Coates, 2024; Pelletier, 2010). Its behavioral signatures, abusive supervision, bullying, ethical failure, and the deliberate undermining of subordinates, were among the most cited drivers of departure during the Great Resignation. That pattern reflects how deeply leadership climate shapes employees' long-term organizational commitment (Sull & Sull, 2022; Walton, 2008). For administrative staff operating within the hierarchical structures of higher education institutions, where positional authority is concentrated and formal channels for grievance are limited, these dynamics carry heightened consequences.

Pelletier's (2010) qualitative research identified four recurring categories of toxic leadership behavior, egotism, ethical failure, incompetence, and neuroticism, each of which maps directly onto SDT's framework of psychological need frustration. Attacks on followers' self-esteem and ideologies of divisiveness frustrate autonomy by removing employees' sense of agency and volition; social exclusion and the promotion of inequity frustrate relatedness by severing the sense of belonging essential for organizational commitment; and leaders' demonstrated incompetence and lack of integrity frustrate competence by undermining

employees' confidence in the institutional environment they are asked to sustain (Green, 2014; Pelletier, 2010). Together these mechanisms produce the diminished motivation, elevated burnout, and heightened turnover intention that toxic leadership consistently generates across organizational contexts (Ogbonda & Amadi, 2022; Weaver & Yancy, 2010; Webster et al., 2014).

Compensation is an equally direct driver of voluntary turnover, operating through a different mechanism than leadership climate but with comparable force on retention outcomes. In a 2024 Gallup poll, 51% of U.S. employees were actively seeking or open to new job opportunities due to low pay (Tatel & Wigert, 2024). Organizational surveys in higher education and related sectors have identified inadequate compensation or limited opportunities for career advancement as decisive factors for employee turnover (CUPA-HR, 2024; Ferraino, 2023; Gallup Inc., 2023). When salaries are inadequate or not competitive, employees are more likely to leave their organization for higher paying roles (Aggarwal, 2022; Figueroa, 2015; Llorens et al., 2011; Syah & Silaban, 2018). For instance, a 2022 survey of over 2,200 workers by a major remote-work platform found that a low salary was among the top five reasons for turnover (Pelta, 2022). Through an SDT lens, inadequate compensation frustrates both competence, signaling to employees that their contributions are institutionally undervalued, and autonomy, as financial constraint narrows the perceived freedom to make meaningful career decisions (Deci et al., 2017). Alongside inadequate pay, barriers to career advancement represent another critical factor in understanding voluntary turnover.

Career advancement barriers arise when employees have limited opportunities for development or promotion, which can increase the likelihood of employee turnover (Davis et al., 2022; Heffernan & McKay, 2018; Jo, 2008; Parker & Horowitz, 2022). Survey data from higher

education personnel indicate that over a third of employees (35.8%) desired a promotion or greater responsibility (Bichsel et al., 2023). Research also shows that the lack of mentoring and professional development can further contribute to voluntary turnover (Davis et al., 2022; Donnelly & McSweeney, 2011; Selesho & Naile, 2014). A notable example of a lack of career development was in a study examining voluntary turnover among mid-level women administrators at an Ivy League university (Jo, 2008). Key findings revealed dissatisfaction with supervisors, limited advancement opportunities, and inflexible work schedules as the primary reasons for leaving. Moreover, Jo (2008) identified a cascading effect in which upper-level departures concentrated expanded responsibilities onto remaining lower-level staff, simultaneously frustrating competence through role overload and autonomy through the loss of any meaningful control over workload demands, conditions that accelerated further turnover. Career advancement barriers systematically frustrate both competence, by blocking the professional growth and mastery employees need to feel effective in their roles, and autonomy, by removing any meaningful sense of agency over one's own professional trajectory (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Beyond compensation and career development, the structure of work itself, specifically the balance between professional demands and personal life, represents a third organizational condition with direct implications for administrative staff retention.

Empirical studies indicate that flexible work policies, including hybrid and remote work arrangements, can significantly improve employee job satisfaction and retention (Capone et al., 2024; Stephen, 2024). For example, a 2020 report found that 72% of employers viewed remote work as a factor in employee retention (Best Human Capital & Advisory, 2020). Similarly, a 2023 survey of 4,782 higher education non-academic staff members found that 68.3% believed their job could be performed remotely while 40.5% preferred a hybrid work schedule (Palmer,

2023). When asked why they left their organization, over 44.2% of administrative professionals cited the desire to work remotely (Bichsel et al., 2023). The denial of flexible work arrangements constitutes a direct frustration of autonomy, stripping employees of meaningful choice over how and where they perform their work (Deci et al., 2017). The following section introduces Self-Determination Theory as the integrative framework that explains how these organizational conditions systematically frustrate basic psychological needs, producing the motivational decline that culminates in voluntary turnover.

Theoretical Framework

Grounded specifically in Basic Psychological Needs Theory (BPNT), a sub-theory of SDT, this study examines how autonomy, competence, and relatedness, each taking on distinct meaning within the satellite campus context, are systematically frustrated by organizational structures, producing the motivational decline that drives voluntary turnover. For administrative professionals, autonomy is tied to influencing campus processes rather than merely executing centralized directives; competence is expressed through professional growth and utilization of expertise; and relatedness encompasses both the local work community and the broader institutional connection to the main campus.

From Need Frustration to Turnover: The Motivational Continuum

A key refinement in this study is the distinction between need satisfaction, which promotes engagement, and need frustration, which occurs when these psychological nutrients are actively undermined. For example, centralized decision-making structures that remove employees' discretion over routine operational decisions may erode autonomy, while institutional communication practices that render satellite staff invisible in university-wide decisions can systematically weaken relatedness and organizational belonging (Deci et al., 2017; Vansteenkiste

et al., 2020).

Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (SDT), the relationship between an employee and their institution is defined by a motivational continuum that directly influences retention. On one end, engagement serves as the visible manifestation of autonomous motivation. Engaged employees work with a sense of purpose and energy because their fundamental needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are actively supported. On the opposite spectrum, burnout is interpreted through an SDT lens not simply as general stress, but as the psychological exhaustion that results from chronic need frustration. When administrative professionals consistently feel controlled or ineffective, their internal energy and vitality are systematically depleted. Over time, this prolonged frustration ultimately culminates in amotivation, a state defined by a complete lack of intent to act or a perceived lack of value in the work (Ryan & Deci, 2000). At this juncture, voluntary turnover is no longer just a career change, but a strategic and restorative move intended to exit a need-thwarting environment and reclaim psychological well-being.

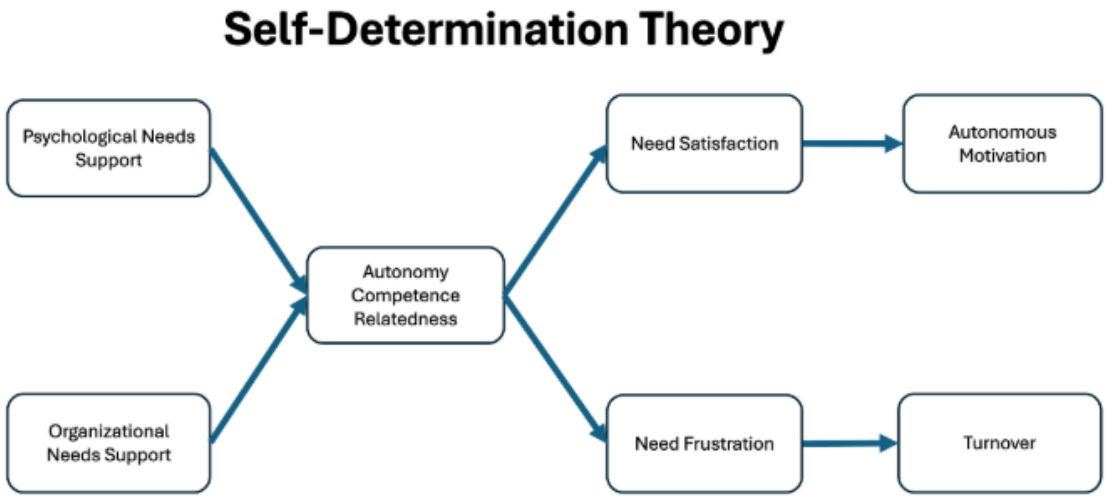
Organizational Factors and the Satellite Context

Organizational factors such as leadership, compensation, and opportunities for remote work act as the "social context" that either supports or thwarts basic psychological needs. As visualized in the *Path to Voluntary Turnover* (**Figure 2**), these external elements act as triggers that influence internal psychological states. This study builds on this foundation by applying SDT to the lived experiences of former administrative professionals, focusing specifically on how the unique satellite-to-main-campus dynamic amplifies experiences of need frustration. For these employees, the structural and relational separation from the main campus can amplify experiences of need frustration, making autonomy, competence, and relatedness more difficult to

satisfy and in some cases directly thwarted.

Figure 2

Path to Voluntary Turnover



Note. Conceptual Framework

Methods

Qualitative Case Study

This study utilized a qualitative case study design, grounded in the interpretive framework described by Merriam (2009). The primary goal was to look beyond raw turnover data and deeply examine the lived experiences of former administrative professionals who worked at a satellite campus. To maintain the rigor required of a formal case study, the research was defined by a specific bounded system. Temporally, the case was bounded by the post-pandemic period of 2021 to 2025, a timeframe that captures the unique organizational shifts and

cultural stressors of the "Great Resignation" era. Spatially, it was bounded to the administrative ecosystem of a satellite campus within a large, public R1 research university.

These boundaries were essential for capturing the "contextual clues" of the satellite experience, such as the physicality of isolation and communication lags, which are frequently obscured in aggregate university data. While broader institutional surveys (see Study 2) provided a macroscopic view of employee trends, the bounded nature of this case allowed for a high-resolution examination of localized variables that standardized metrics may fail to trigger.

Following Merriam (2009), the unit of analysis was the satellite campus itself, rather than the individual participants. This single-case design was chosen because the satellite campus represents a unique "bounded ecosystem" with specific organizational dynamics that differ from the main campus. The bounding criteria included: (a) former administrative employees, (b) those who transitioned through a voluntary exit, and (c) tenure during the post-COVID context. This focus provided the rationale for a single-case design; by deeply exploring this specific site, the study achieved the description necessary for transferability to other satellite or marginalized organizational contexts.

In addition, this inquiry prioritized the subjective perspectives of participants while simultaneously providing a foundation for analytic generalization (Yin, 2018). Rather than seeking statistical representativeness, this study aimed to extend Self-Determination Theory (SDT) by exploring its constructs in the specific, often overlooked context of satellite campus operations. This approach was particularly vital in a mixed-methods design because quantitative scales measure the magnitude of need frustration while this bounded qualitative inquiry identifies the specific mechanisms of need thwarting that drive the decision to leave, a distinction that neither method could produce in isolation.

This qualitative phase served as the critical "anchor" for a larger, sequential multi-stage research project. By identifying context-specific constructs, such as the unique psychological toll of operating on a satellite campus, this paper informed the development of context-specific measurement scales that were utilized in the subsequent phases of the study.

Site Selection

The study is situated within a single R1 research university, a Carnegie Classification designation reflecting very high research spending and doctorate production. Within this institution, the satellite campus serves approximately 1,000 students and employs fewer than 200 full-time administrative staff across six functional areas. Located approximately 140 miles from the main campus, it operates as a degree-completion site offering more than 30 programs, functioning as a critical access point for nontraditional, first-generation, and geographically dispersed students in the surrounding regional community. Administrative staff at this location frequently function as sole practitioners within their functional areas, without the departmental redundancy available at the main campus, a structural condition that amplifies the operational impact of each departure (Wolfe & Strange, 2003).

Data Collection

Using Merriam's (2009) criteria for purposeful sampling, nine former employees were selected to represent the bounded case of the satellite campus. Inclusion criteria targeted former exempt administrative professionals who voluntarily exited the institution between 2021 and 2025. While participants held roles ranging from mid-level management to senior leadership, they are collectively referred to as administrative professionals to reflect their shared responsibility for the campus's operational success.

While a sample of nine participants may appear small, it was appropriate for this bounded

case given the limited and relatively homogeneous population of the satellite campus. Data saturation, the point at which no new codes or themes emerge from the data, was reached by the seventh interview. Following Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006), who found that saturation often occurs within twelve interviews in homogeneous groups, this sample size was sufficient to capture the core psychological drivers of turnover within this institutional context. Additionally, the consistency of themes across participants supported the determination that saturation was achieved.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted via Zoom. To maximize the depth of these sessions, the interview protocol utilized a two-stage inquiry. Interviews began with broad, open-ended questions inviting participants to provide spontaneous narrative accounts of their exit experience, allowing themes to emerge organically from participants' own framing of their departure. This was followed by targeted follow-up questions probing experiences related to the three basic psychological needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Interviews typically lasted 20–60 minutes; a duration appropriate to the study's focused inquiry. Research on information-rich qualitative interviews suggests that concentrated, single-topic sessions with participants sharing a common organizational experience can yield sufficient depth for thematic saturation within shorter durations than multi-topic designs (Guest et al., 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). The participants' shared organizational history and the two-stage protocol, moving from open narrative to targeted SDT probing, ensured that sessions produced the concentrated, theoretically grounded accounts consistent with the principles of purposeful sampling (Merriam, 2009).

Participant Characteristics

This case study included nine former administrative professionals who voluntarily departed the institution between 2021 and 2025. Participants represented a broad range of operational areas, including academic affairs, student services, and enrollment management. Their tenure at the institution ranged from 17 months to 30 years (M = 11.3 years). **Table 2** summarizes their years of service, broad role category, and campus experience. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identity of the participants. Campus experience" in **Table 2** distinguishes participants whose tenure was confined to the satellite location ("Satellite only") from those who transitioned to the satellite campus after a prior assignment at the main campus ("Satellite and Main"); three participants (INT03, INT05, and INT08) brought this comparative vantage point from having worked under both governance structures before their satellite tenure began Although the study focuses on administrative roles, the sample consisted of six mid-level and three senior-level administrators. This composition is representative of a satellite campus environment, where mid- to upper-level leaders often maintain "everyday" administrative responsibilities alongside their leadership functions.

Table 2
Participant Demographics

Participant	Years of Service	Role	Campus Experience
INT01	25 years	VP Public Relations	Satellite only
INT02	7 years	Student Services	Satellite only
INT03	9 years	Student Affairs	Satellite and Main
INT04	8.5 years	Student Services	Satellite only
INT05	5.5 years	Human Relations	Satellite and Main
INT06	11.5 years	Manager, Graduate Student Affairs	Satellite only
INT07	17 months	Student Success Coordinator	Satellite only
INT08	30 years	VP Academic Operations	Satellite and Main

INT09	4 years	Director, Student Services	Satellite only

Note: All participant names are pseudonyms assigned to ensure anonymity. Participants ($N = 9$) are former administrative professionals from a single higher education satellite campus who voluntarily left their positions between 2021 and 2025.

Data Saturation

In qualitative inquiry, the adequacy of the sample is determined by data saturation; the point at which no new themes or insights emerge from additional interviews (Guest, Bunce, and Johnson, 2006; Saunders et al., 2018). For this bounded case study, saturation was assessed through a recursive process of 'constant comparison' during the coding phase. By the seventh and eighth interviews, the primary themes of centralized control, physical isolation, and stalled career growth were repeatedly corroborated, and the ninth interview yielded no new dimensions of the 'need thwarting' construct. While the participant count is nine, the high degree of homogeneity among the participants (all former administrative staff from the same satellite campus) allowed data saturation' to occur relatively quickly, ensuring the depth of the findings within the study's specific boundaries.

Data Analysis

This study utilized a hybrid thematic analysis (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006), a dual-process approach designed to balance the structure of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) with the lived complexities of the satellite campus. By integrating deductive a priori coding with inductive, data-driven exploration, I ensured the findings remained theoretically grounded while staying open to the specific nuances of the case.

The analysis began with a deductive pass, using a structured codebook to identify the three basic psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2000). This provided a necessary framework for categorizing experiences that aligned with established

motivational constructs. However, to prevent over-reliance on deductive codes alone, I conducted a follow-on inductive review. This second pass allowed for the emergence of latent themes such as ‘benign neglect’ and ‘asymmetric power dynamics’ that fell outside the SDT framework but were vital to understanding the participants' reality.

To manage this complexity, I used Dedoose to organize transcripts and refine the final codebook. This iterative "toggling" between theory and raw data moved the analysis beyond simple categorization and allowed for a systemic mapping of how organizational factors and turnover intersect. The result was an interpretation that viewed the satellite campus through an SDT lens without sacrificing the context-rich stories that define it.

Trustworthiness

To ensure the rigor of this qualitative inquiry, the study adheres to the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Credibility was established through persistent engagement with the data and several validation strategies. First, member checking was employed; all nine participants were provided with their full interview transcripts via secure email for review. Three participants responded with minor clarifications regarding specific organizational timelines, which were then incorporated to ensure the accuracy of the "post-pandemic" context. Second, peer debriefing was conducted throughout the analysis phase with a colleague experienced in qualitative methods. These sessions served to challenge emergent codes, such as "benign neglect", ensuring they were grounded in the data rather than researcher bias. Finally, direct quotes are used extensively in the findings to amplify participant voices and provide a transparent link between the raw data and the SDT-informed themes.

Transferability is supported through description of the research site and participant

demographics. By detailing the unique aspects of the satellite campus and the specific roles of the administrative staff, this study provides the contextual depth necessary for other multi-campus institutions to determine the applicability of these findings to their own settings.

Dependability was maintained through a detailed audit trail of the collection and coding process. All data were managed using Dedoose software (2025), which allowed for the systematic tracking of code evolution from initial inductive observations to final deductive categories linked to SDT. This documentation ensures that the research process is transparent, logical, and replicable.

Finally, confirmability was enhanced through the use of a reflexivity journal and a formal positionality statement. These tools allowed for a continuous self-critique of my role as an "insider" at a satellite campus, ensuring that the final interpretations were a product of the participants' lived experiences and the theoretical framework rather than my own professional frustrations or biases.

Positionality

As an administrative professional in higher education, I bring an insider perspective to this research. My professional role provides firsthand experience with the types of organizational dynamics that influence administrative professionals, giving me unique insights into the context I am studying. This insider perspective provides several advantages. For instance, my familiarity with institutional processes, structures, and workflows allows me to conduct more informed and nuanced interviews. In addition, it helps to foster trust and rapport with the participants since I shared a common professional environment and previously worked alongside many of them at the same university. Those shared experiences encourage openness and more candid dialogue during data collection. However, this proximity to the topic and participants may introduce

potential challenges. My existing relationships and prior knowledge may unintentionally influence how I interpret the data, which could lead to potential biases or assumptions that could affect the study's objectivity. To mitigate these risks, I have engaged in peer debriefing and practiced reflexivity, interpreting participants' narratives from their own perspective rather than my own.

Ethical Consideration

This study received Institutional Review Board approval prior to data collection, ensuring compliance with ethical standards for human subject research. Oral informed consent was obtained from each participant to ensure they fully understood the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights. Participant's identities remain confidential, and all identifiable information was removed from the interview transcript. A unique identifier key was assigned to each participant, and this key was stored on an encrypted server. All data will be retained until study completion in 2027, at which point it will be destroyed. Participants were informed during the consent process and within the interview that their participation is voluntary, and they could withdraw at any time. Detailed field notes were taken during the interviews to document participants' experiences, ensuring the data reflect their perspective rather than the researcher's.

Limitations

This study carries three primary limitations: a small purposive sample bound to a single satellite campus, reliance on retrospective self-report, and a post-pandemic timeframe that may not reflect stable organizational conditions.

First, the sample of nine participants from a single satellite campus, while appropriate for a bounded qualitative case study and sufficient for data saturation within this specific context, limits the analytic generalizability of the findings. The constructs identified here, asymmetric

power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, are theoretically grounded and contextually documented, but their applicability to other institutional types, governance structures, or campus configurations requires empirical testing through future multi-site designs.

Second, reliance on retrospective self-report introduces two related risks. Participants may experience recall bias, where the passage of time or subsequent professional experiences may have reshaped or smoothed their narratives. Post-hoc rationalization may also occur, as former employees seek to provide a logical or socially acceptable framework for their departure. To mitigate these risks, the study utilized member checking and compared individual accounts against known institutional reorganizations to ensure the chronological and thematic consistency of the data.

Third, data collection occurred in the post-pandemic period, a timeframe characterized by heightened labor market volatility and shifting employee expectations associated with the Great Resignation. While this context is theoretically relevant, the pandemic amplified existing need frustration conditions and accelerated departure decisions, it introduces the possibility that the patterns documented here reflect a period-specific organizational disruption rather than stable structural conditions. Longitudinal replication during a less volatile labor market period would be necessary to assess the durability of these findings.

Findings

This section presents how participants' workplace experiences reflected two interrelated categories of factors driving voluntary turnover: the frustration of basic psychological needs as identified by Self-Determination Theory, and the organizational stressors that amplified that frustration. Across nine interviews, lack of autonomy emerged in seven cases, while frustrated competence appeared in all participants' accounts. Relatedness concerns were also consistently

described, particularly around issues of isolation and communication. One participant represented a contrasting case: their department's structural independence from main campus control appeared protective against the need frustration described by others, and they departed primarily for external opportunities rather than workplace dissatisfaction. Table 3 shows the themes and associated sub-themes. Findings are organized into two sections: SDT Psychological Needs, which addresses the frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness; and Organizational Stressors, which address the structural, leadership, and extrinsic conditions that compounded that frustration.

Table 3
Qualitative Themes

Primary Themes (SDT Need)	**Subthemes**	**Secondary Themes (Organizational Stressors)**
Frustrated Autonomy	Lack of Authority and Centralized Control Limited Flexibility and Remote Work Opportunities	Satellite Campus Structural and Resource Deficits
Frustrated Competence	Insufficient Training and Support Lack of Growth and Advancement Boredom and Lack of Meaningful Work	Organizational Disrespect and Psychological Toll
Frustrated Relatedness	Feeling of Isolation Communication Barriers	Organizational Accountability and Leadership Failure
Extrinsic Factors		Compensation and Extrinsic Drivers

Note. Primary themes represent the frustration of basic psychological needs as defined by Self-Determination Theory (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Subthemes provide specific examples of these frustrations. Secondary themes represent the institutional and environmental drivers that contribute to need frustration within the satellite campus context.

SDT Psychological Needs

Frustrated Autonomy

Autonomy, as defined by the Self-Determination Theory, refers to an individual's feeling of volition and choice in their own actions or behavior (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the workplace, this translates into freedom in how they perform their tasks and make decisions related to their roles. Common expressions of workplace autonomy include the ability to make decisions, control over workplace methods, and scheduling flexibility. However, when autonomy is frustrated, an individual experiences a loss of agency where they feel that their ability to make choices or act according to their own will is blocked or restricted by institutional structures or organizational policies (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The following section explores how this experience of frustrated autonomy emerged in seven of the nine interviews.

Lack of authority and centralized control. Lack of authority refers to the absence of legitimate power, jurisdiction, or authorization to make decisions, enforce rules, or give orders. It can create an unstable environment, a power vacuum, or lead to rendered decisions being considered invalid. A clear majority of the cohort (seven out of nine participants) remarked how their inability to effectively do their job was due to a lack of authority. This restriction of day-to-day agency was deeply visible when peripheral employees attempted to manage immediate, site-specific issues. For example, INT05 described attempting to resolve a student file issue locally, only to find their operational boundaries restricted by central mandates: "And so it was a lot of education of, well, let me take that to central.. rather than being able to make the call on it right then and there. So that became a little bit... frustrating..." This systemic bottleneck extended into digital infrastructure and database management. INT02 detailed a pattern of proprietary gatekeeping by central campus personnel, which explicitly blocked satellite staff from achieving

functional mastery over their systems: "I would say, 'Hey, we need this change done to this.' And he would say, 'Well, I'll change that for you.' And I would say, 'Well, if you just give me the instructions... I'll learn...' he refused. And it is very frustrating... They're very proprietary there for some reason." Critically, this denial of clear authority and collaborative support created an operational double-bind, where peripheral staff were penalized during retrospective audits for processing methods that the main campus never formally documented.

As INT02 reflected during a high-stakes meeting, central coordinators "ripped me a new one and said, I had been doing it wrong this whole time... I said, 'You know, then you need to tell me. Because three years after the fact really doesn't help a whole lot of people.' ... Can you write it down? 'No. You just need to do it.' ... MAIN was really difficult to work with." Even at higher management levels, local authority was systematically overridden by central administrative structures.

INT01 recalled how main campus executives deflected accountability for severe, top-down workplace disruptions, stating, "I was on the leadership team... until they completed the reorganization... They said their hands were tied by human resources and that it was an HR decision.". In organizational contexts, autonomy is supported when employees can exercise judgment, make decisions within their domain, and influence how they accomplish their work (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Conversely, autonomy is frustrated when organizational structures actively prevent employees from acting on their judgment, forcing them to defer routine decisions to higher authority (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). In multi-campus higher education systems, centralized governance structures often concentrate decision-making authority at the main campus, leaving satellite campus personnel with limited discretion to address local needs (Groenwald, 2018).

Beyond limited decision-making authority, participants described frustration over their inability to influence their own work processes and workflows. Centralized control is a governance or management system where decision-making power, authority, and oversight are concentrated in a single central authority. Instead of delegating choices to local or regional branches, a main headquarters or node dictates policies, system logic, and operations across the entire network or organization. In the interviews, five out of nine participants described frustration over their inability to influence their own work processes and workflows. There were instances where participants felt unable to fully execute their job at the local level or make inputs into their work design. One participant described the feeling of being constantly accessible yet underutilized, noting they "had to keep Microsoft Teams open on a separate monitor all day, waiting to be 'tapped' for tasks," explaining, "It felt like I was waiting on a shelf for whenever someone needed to talk to me or ask me a question. Then I provide the answer, and they put me back on the shelf." (INT09). This vivid description captures the sense of passivity and disengagement that arises when employees are deprived of agency in guiding their workflow. When asked how they felt about their work, one participant noted, "…I have no input into what I'm doing. I'm not doing anything creative." (INT04). This sense of operational constraint was driven directly by macro-level structural adjustments.

As INT01 noted, "the entire JOB1 function for the entire university was centralized onto the MAIN campus," leaving local teams with no input. This was summarized in a top-down delivery bluntly: "It was laid out that this is what we're going to do. Here's how we're going to do it. And it was done." (INT01). This statement reflects the disillusionment that can arise when individuals are denied a voice in shaping their work. This highlighted not only the frustration of

diminished autonomy but also the risk of employees feeling reduced to transactional laborers rather than valued contributors.

Self-Determination Theory states that autonomy satisfaction requires not only freedom from external control but also opportunities to provide input and shape one's work environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Research demonstrates that when employees lack voice in decisions affecting their roles, they experience diminished intrinsic motivation and reduced organizational commitment (Gagné & Deci, 2005). This lack of input transforms inherently meaningful work into mechanical task execution, undermining both the autonomy and competence needs central to SDT (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Limited flexibility and remote work opportunities. Limited flexibility refers to rigid work environments where employees have little to no control over when, where, or how they perform their duties. This architecture typically demands strict adherence to a fixed schedule, mandatory on-site presence, and minimal discretion over local working conditions. In the interviews, two out of nine participants expressed intense frustration over a controlled work environment that severely limited their operational flexibility. For example, the post-COVID-19 environment revealed stark disparities in how flexibility mandates were distributed across different campuses. One participant described being denied localized remote work options that were openly available to main campus colleagues operating in identical roles, noting, “...on the main campus, the same department I worked, they all got to take turns working from home one day and that wasn't offered to us, and that was frustrating” (INT02). When a group within the satellite department attempted to advocate for basic structural adjustments, their efforts were met with an absolute, top-down refusal. INT02 recalled that when a colleague tried to "finagle the window situation" or seek standard schedule adjustments, the request "was met with a harsh no".

This localized rigidity became particularly draining when contrasted with the systemic remote-work frameworks officially adopted by the broader university network. INT04 highlighted the deep isolation that resulted when their direct supervisor refused to authorize standard human resources hybrid allowances: "the university did adopt that then work from home, rules with HR where you could you could work from home a day or two a week if your supervisor allowed it. Well, mine didn't." (INT04). This enforced, inflexible physical presence during low-volume operational periods generated a grinding sense of futility, as INT04 reflected on staring at a computer screen in a dark office with zero inbound workflow: "if I were at home, I would have a little more freedom to... throw on a load of laundry if I needed to... I'm not just sitting here staring at a computer, waiting for something to do all day." (INT04).

Workplace flexibility represents a key dimension of autonomy in Self-Determination Theory, with research showing that flexible arrangements enhance well-being and commitment (Buick et al., 2024; Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Conversely, rigid policies that deny flexibility, particularly when available to comparable employees, actively frustrate autonomy needs (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This perceived inequity in autonomy-supportive practices undermines motivation more severely than universally restrictive policies (Colquitt et al., 2013). The disparate treatment ultimately signaled to satellite personnel that they were structurally valued less than their main campus counterparts, compounding a severe frustration of autonomy with a distinct thwarting of institutional relatedness (Deci et al., 2017).

Overall, participants described restricted authority, centralized decision-making, and unequal flexibility, which left them feeling disempowered. These conditions frustrated autonomy by narrowing opportunities for choice and inhibiting responsiveness to local challenges.

Frustrated Competence

Self-Determination Theory defines competence as the need to feel effective and capable in achieving desired outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Competence is supported through adequate training, developmental opportunities, and appropriately challenging work. It is frustrated when organizational conditions undermine employees' sense of effectiveness (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Research links competence frustration to disengagement and turnover (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Competence frustration was the only form of psychological need frustration reported by all nine participants, making it the most universally experienced factor in this study. While autonomy frustration emerged in seven interviews and relatedness frustration varied, every former staff member described organizational conditions that systematically undermined their capability and effectiveness. Analysis of these accounts revealed three recurring patterns through which organizational conditions frustrated competence: insufficient training and support, lack of growth and advancement opportunities, and unchallenging work that precluded meaningful skill development.

Insufficient training and support. Insufficient training and support refer to an organizational environment where employees are denied clear written procedures, comprehensive onboarding, or responsive channels of communication required to master their occupational duties. In the interviews, three out of nine participants explicitly cited poor communication and a distinct gatekeeping of institutional guidance as primary barriers to feeling competent in their roles. This systemic bottleneck was highly visible when satellite personnel attempted to navigate complex structural processes with centralized departments. While working a personnel issue with the main campus, one participant shared the operational friction caused by detached departments, noting, "…we had a few key departments that it was very hard to get a

response from…" (INT05). This lack of timely support directly hindered on-site efficiency and routinely forced satellite employees to execute tasks without baseline validation. This operational isolation was further exacerbated by a lack of structured, formal training pipelines during critical transitional periods.

INT04 recalled the immense stress of being promoted into an advanced administrative role with zero structured onboarding, having to navigate a high-stakes institutional audit completely blind: "my training was not great in that respect, because, yes, I learned how to do processes, but they weren't the processes I needed to do when I took over the job... My first five to six months... were horribly stressful. Horribly stressful because, again, I would be doing things, hoping I was doing them correctly" (INT04).

Although immediate workspace questions were occasionally answered, the overall absence of a formalized roadmap forced peripheral staff into a continuous state of professional vulnerability. Critically, when satellite employees actively sought the technical training required to build localized capability, main campus administrators explicitly refused to share operational workflows. INT02 detailed a pattern of proprietary gatekeeping by central coordinators that systematically blocked task mastery: "I would say, 'Hey... if you just give me the instructions, or walk me through it, I'll learn and then I'll be able to—' he refused. And it is very frustrating... They expected you to know, but they didn't tell you" (INT02). This asymmetric dynamic meant that changes to system logic were implemented at the center without notifying the branch location, as INT02 reflected: "they would change this part of what they did... and they never told us. And we're operating for months and months under the assumption that it goes this way... It was maddening" (INT02).

The lack of timely support hindered operational efficiency and contributed to a sense of isolation and disconnection. Self-Determination Theory research shows that such unreliable access to expertise and resources directly frustrates the competence need by blocking employees' ability to master tasks and feel effective, often leading to reduced engagement and heightened burnout (Deci, Olafsen, & Ryan, 2017). When employees cannot obtain the guidance needed to perform duties effectively, competence is systematically undermined, amplifying motivational deficits across the organization.

Lack of Growth and Advancement. A lack of growth and development refers to an organizational state where an employee feels trapped in their current role with no clear pathways to advance vertically, acquire progressive professional skills, or increase their earning potential. In the interviews, three out of nine participants expressed profound frustration over the absolute absence of clear mechanisms for professional development or advancement within the satellite campus architecture. This structural deficit was highly visible when mid-career staff recognized that vertical mobility required abandoning their local campus entirely. As one participant emphasized, “I would say the main factor [for leaving] was probably the lack of ability to grow within the position. So there wasn't going to be an alternate way for me to, like, get promoted in my position unless I moved to a different department, or I left that campus for a different campus, essentially” (INT03). Even when lateral department changes were occasionally explored to foster professional growth, systemic territorial boundaries penalized internal applicants, rendering localized career progression non-viable. This stagnation became particularly insulting when employees discovered that higher financial classifications existed but were actively withheld by localized management.

INT04 highlighted how an absolute ceiling on growth transformed their long-term commitment into profound disillusionment: "For the longest time, I was okay with where I was because really, there was nowhere to go. You know, we're small. There really isn't a lot of upward mobility within our campus structure... And then when I decided to leave, found out that it would have been possible to be given at least a different classification... which would have moved me into a higher salary. And that was—that was insulting, to say the least" (INT04).

Because progressive responsibilities were coupled with an institutional refusal to adjust compensation tiers, long-tenured staff ultimately realized their systemic value had been capped. Furthermore, macro-level centralization efforts actively eradicated existing leadership tracks at the peripheral location, dismantling multi-decade career plans overnight. INT01 reflected that the total removal of local leadership functions completely forced their voluntary exit: "The department I was in was centralized out of the MAIN campus, and there wasn't really any opportunities for me at a leadership level compared to what I had been doing and where I felt that I should be focusing... If there was not a reorg... I would have told you that I was gonna retire from [university]." (INT01). The intersection of frozen local tracks and central absorptions effectively signaled to satellite personnel that their long-term professional aspirations were structurally incompatible with the institution's centralized logic.

Self-Determination Theory states that satisfying the competence need requires an environment that offers regular opportunities for skill mastery, optimal challenge, and visible pathways for progressive professional growth (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When organizational structures eliminate vertical mobility and cap compensation potential, they freeze the employee in a state of chronic career stagnation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Without visible vectors for progressive efficacy, inherently dedicated administrative staff experience a profound decline in

autonomous motivation, transforming once-committed personnel into disengaged leavers whose primary recourse is voluntary departure (Deci et al., 2017).

Boredom and Lack of Meaningful Work. Boredom and a lack of meaningful work refer to an organizational state resulting from chronic under-stimulation, repetitive task models, and a structural environment where daily duties feel detached from a purposeful institutional impact. In the interviews, two out of nine participants felt this acute sense of stagnation during their tenure at the satellite location.

One participant captured this mechanical reality with particular clarity: "Basically, my job consisted of data entry. I just spent all day putting things into a computer... There was nothing where I felt like I was actually making a contribution or had any kind of input or could use any of my creativity, anything that I didn't feel like I had any kind of agency in what I was doing. And that was getting frustrating and boring" (INT04).

This lack of meaningful challenge severely restricted the baseline conditions necessary for standard competence development. This operational monotony became profoundly magnified by the rigid architectural and social isolation enforced after the COVID-19 pandemic.

INT04 described how the physical work environment actively worsened this under-stimulation, cutting off the communal touchstones that previously offset routine data tasks: "our offices didn't have windows, couldn't even look outside. So we were stuck in these small, dark, quiet offices staring at a computer all day. And it was so depressing and just soul sucking... We couldn't eat lunch together. We had to sit at our desks to eat lunch... You'd walk the halls and there was nobody there" (INT04).

When the small window of meaningful face-to-face interaction with students vanished post-pandemic, the last remaining vector for personal fulfillment disappeared, leaving only an

empty routine. When asked directly about how this chronic lack of stimulation altered their daily emotional state, another participant offered an identical, blunt summary: "I was so bored. Bored out of my mind... It wasn't rocket science, but I liked the people I was engaged with on a daily basis... [but] it just wasn't enough after a while" (INT02). This persistent boredom was structurally reinforced by a localized management choice to leave roles entirely un-enriched, as INT02 noted: "I think that our supervisor could have classified our jobs differently for more pay, and I think she chose not to" (INT02). Together, these accounts demonstrate that boredom within the satellite campus was not an incidental psychological state, but a direct consequence of an organizational architecture that systematically denied desk-level staff the task variety, human connection, and functional growth necessary to sustain intrinsic motivation.

Self-Determination Theory indicates that competence satisfaction requires an optimal balance of task challenge, environmental stimulation, and opportunities to feel systematically effective (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When employees are confined to repetitive data manipulation within a physically isolating, low-volume workspace, their sense of personal agency and professional efficacy erodes simultaneously (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This chronic under-stimulation transforms daily workplace presence into an act of emotional withdrawal and profound passivity, illustrating how a structural failure to cultivate meaningful work environments actively thwarts both the competence and autonomy needs required to retain experienced personnel (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Frustrated Relatedness

Relatedness, as defined by Self-Determination Theory, reflects the fundamental need to feel connected to and cared for by others, and to experience a genuine sense of belonging within one's social and organizational environment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). In the workplace, this

involves meaningful relationships, mutual respect, and institutional inclusion. When relatedness is frustrated, individuals experience isolation, exclusion, or even emotional disconnection. These conditions are not due to personal failure but by organizational structures that can limit collaboration, sever communication, or cause employees to be invisible within the broader institutional community (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Feelings of Isolation. Feelings of isolation refer to a subjective sense of professional detachment, lack of institutional belonging, or relationship scarcity within the workplace setting. In the interviews, four out of nine participants described a profound sense of isolation that operated through three distinct but reinforcing conditions: structural marginalization from the center, pandemic-induced physical disconnection, and post-pandemic relational decay.

The first condition predated the pandemic and was rooted in the satellite campus's physical and organizational distance from the main campus center, which left employees feeling completely invisible to upper leadership. One participant captured the cumulative weight of this structural abandonment bluntly, stating: "I felt like I was not wanted by the university. When I say by the university, I mean MAIN... I felt like the MAIN leadership could care less whether or not I was there. Whether or not I worked for the university" (INT01).

The second condition was a pandemic-induced physical disconnection that severely aggravated this pre-existing marginalization. Participants described being cut off from basic human proximity due to rigid localized mandates that eliminated the informal interactions through which workplace belonging is typically sustained.

INT04 captured the deep psychological toll of working in absolute confinement within a dead workspace: "COVID was a huge wake up call because while the rest of the university was allowed to work from home... we were required to be back at the office 40 hours a week... And

that was very isolating and lonely and depressing... we had to fight to even be allowed to keep our doors open in our offices... we couldn't eat lunch together. We had to sit at our desks to eat lunch. So and, you know, our offices didn't have windows, couldn't even look outside. So we were stuck in these small, dark, quiet offices staring at a computer all day. And it was so depressing and just soul sucking" (INT04).

The third situation emerged in the post-pandemic period, as the historic relational networks that once acted as a protective buffer against main campus neglect began to permanently dissolve. Participants described a shifting office dynamic where a younger, more detached workforce and changing supervisory habits dismantled the communal lunch tables that kept staff anchored to their roles.

INT02 reflected on how the loss of this community ultimately broke their desire to stay: "I adore the people I work with. But... the reason I stayed longer than I wanted to [was because] we would all meet for lunch at the table and just visit and talk... And after I left, [a coworker] said that they just kind of stopped doing that... between PROG2 and PROG1 and management and it just became Nah" (INT02).

INT04 mirrored this exact loss of relational continuity: "For my immediate department, again, up until this past year, we had the best time... Unfortunately... the dynamic was changing. The majority of the people in the department now are much younger... Some very quiet people... And so the fun lunch table discussions were diminishing. That community feeling was going away. So it was starting to feel very isolating, again" (INT04).

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, these converging narratives demonstrate that relatedness satisfaction requires a stable foundation of interpersonal connection and mutual institutional recognition (Ryan & Deci, 2017). When an organization combines structural

marginalization from the center with localized practices that systematically restrict social spaces and communal connectivity, it severely thwarts the basic psychological need for belonging (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). This chronic relational decay strips the satellite workspace of its unique perk, its tight-knit community, thereby rendering the remaining transactional tasks unsupportable and driving experienced personnel toward voluntary exit (Deci et al., 2017).

Communication Barriers. Communication barriers refer to structural obstacles that prevent the clear, timely, and accurate exchange of information between different organizational units. In the interviews, four out of nine participants experienced persistent barriers to clear and consistent information flow between the satellite location and the main campus center. For example, central campus coordinators routinely implemented updates to baseline system logic without notifying the branch staff who used those systems daily.

INT02 detailed the maddening nature of this operational asymmetry: "they would change this part of what they did. And they've never told us. And we're operating for months and months under the assumption that it goes this way and really they changed it to go this way, but they didn't tell us. So... it was maddening" (INT02).

This systemic lack of transparency routinely manifested as a total absence of consultation or explanation during major campus-wide structural changes. INT04 highlighted how an abrupt shift in supervisory habits and localized rules was forced upon desk-level staff with zero open dialogue or institutional justification:

"I saw the management style of my direct supervisor completely change in the course of a year... to make herself look good towards the new leadership... If there had been an explanation of, 'Hey, I know this is frustrating... but now with the new leadership, we really kind of have to change the way we do things, and I'm sorry about that.' That would have been one thing. But

there was no attempt to even explain it. It was just this switch in how we were being managed" (INT04).

When administrative adjustments are executed via top-down mandates without an informational bridge, peripheral staff are left to navigate operational changes completely blind. Furthermore, this communication barrier frequently transformed from a lack of transparency into absolute non-responsiveness from centralized administrative nodes. Peripheral personnel found themselves stuck in one-way communication loops, wasting critical operational time chasing detached departments for baseline guidance. As another participant shared when attempting to coordinate central processes from the branch office: "we had a few key departments that it was very hard to get a response from... Most communications involved phone calls and emails for further guidance or clarifying information, yet responses were often delayed or absent" (INT05). INT01 mirrored this severe information block during the university-wide consolidation, noting that macro-level decisions were handed down as finished products with zero opportunity for localized feedback: "No, none. It was laid out that this is what we're going to do. Here's how we're going to do it. And it was done" (INT01).

Through the lens of Self-Determination Theory, these pervasive communication barriers generate a dual frustration of both autonomy and relatedness needs. These roadblocks directly disrupted the completion of task updates, delayed localized decision-making, and increased intense operational frustration. A total deficit of transparent, timely information regarding institutional logic severely undercuts an employee's sense of autonomy, as they are deprived of the agency required to guide their own roles and workflows (Gagné & Deci, 2005). Simultaneously, being systematically excluded from the organizational information loop thwarts the basic need for relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2017). By leaving branch staff operationally

disconnected from the institutional center, these communication barriers signal to employees that their insights are neither sought nor valued, reducing them to transactional laborers and accelerating their intention to exit the organization (Deci et al., 2017).

Organizational Stressors

While the preceding section examined how satellite campus structures frustrated the three basic psychological needs, participants also described a set of organizational conditions that operated as amplifiers, compounding existing need frustration and accelerating motivational decline toward the decision to leave. These stressors were not simply additional sources of dissatisfaction but active mechanisms of need thwarting: conditions that rejected, dismissed, or structurally marginalized employees in ways that SDT research associates with the most severe psychological consequences (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Three organizational stressors emerged across participant accounts: organizational disrespect and its psychological toll, satellite campus structural and resource deficits, and failures of organizational accountability and leadership.

Organizational Disrespect and Psychological Toll

SDT distinguishes between need dissatisfaction (needs not met) and need thwarting (needs actively blocked through controlling, rejecting, or belittling treatment), with research showing that thwarting produces particularly severe psychological consequences (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Participants' experiences were seen to be disregarding employee input which thwarted autonomy and the dismissal of contributions which undermined competence.

The growing effect of organizational decisions left employees questioning their value. One participant reflected leadership decisions made without consultation: "I felt like I was not wanted by the university" (INT01), specifically referring to MAIN leadership. This sense of

rejection was echoed by another participant who described their treatment with feelings of being "disrespected" (INT08). The language of being "not wanted" and "disrespected" captures what SDT describes as threats to basic dignity and worth that accompany severe need thwarting.

The organizational disrespect became so severe for one person that they reached a "breaking point basically with my mental health" and had to take "a month of leave" (INT07) due to their issues. This escalation from workplace stress to mental health crisis aligns with SDT research showing that prolonged need thwarting predicts psychological ill-being, burnout, and even depression (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This participant's experience demonstrates that employee departure decisions are not merely rational career calculations but can represent necessary acts of self-preservation when workplace conditions become psychologically damaging. In SDT terms, voluntary turnover represents flight from an environment of active need thwarting that threatened fundamental well-being, not simply pursuit of better opportunities elsewhere. These individual experiences of psychological harm did not arise in isolation, they were produced and sustained by the structural conditions of the satellite campus itself, where resource asymmetry, institutional distance, and constrained decision-making authority created the organizational environment in which need thwarting became not an exception but a predictable feature of daily work.

Satellite Campus Structural and Resource Deficits

The structural and resource limitations of the satellite campus extended beyond logistical challenges to constitute systemic barriers to psychological need satisfaction. Participants described enduring obstacles related to 'manpower and funding approvals' that constrained decision-making autonomy and hindered their ability to perform effectively. The marked disparity between satellite and main campuses underscored feelings of diminished competence;

as one staff member observed, 'the lack of resources that we have in comparison to the main campus is really obvious, and I think is a cause of stress for a lot of students' (INT03). The shortage of institutional support and recognition led employees to question their efficacy and value.

The structural isolation extended to organizational design. One participant noted the campus operated as 'just such a different structure,' with 'the library report[ing] up through operations, which no other library does' (INT06), an arrangement that severed relatedness by disconnecting staff from the professional communities and institutional networks their main campus counterparts took for granted.

Across these accounts, a pattern emerged that participants themselves described as benign neglect: upper leadership rarely visited; important decisions were made elsewhere, and local concerns were routinely overlooked. Central administration's limited understanding of the satellite environment was frequently interpreted as institutional indifference, captured most starkly by one employee's reflection that leadership 'could care less whether or not I worked for the university' [sic] (INT01). Benign neglect represents a distinct form of relatedness frustration, one produced not by active hostility but by structural inattention, in which employees are rendered organizationally invisible rather than explicitly excluded. The cumulative effect of resource asymmetry, structural isolation, and institutional inattention was a systematic frustration of all three psychological needs, creating the conditions for the accountability and leadership failures examined in the following section.

Organizational Accountability and Leadership Failure

Participants described a pervasive breakdown of accountability and a perceived absence of supportive leadership from the main campus, which collectively deepened feelings of neglect

and disempowerment. When employees sought clarity about a major reorganization, leaders "passed the hot potato," (INT01) evading responsibility and leaving staff uncertain about who was making decisions. The reorganization itself was enacted with "no input" from those most affected, reinforcing a sense that worker autonomy was actively dismissed, an experience consistent with the thwarting of the SDT need for self-determination. One participant captured this dynamic, noting that decisions were simply "laid out that this is what we're going to do," illustrating how top-down approaches strip employees of agency and voice.

At the local level, leadership failures amplified these effects. One participant described their supervisor's "very aggressive... almost accusatory" communication style, which not only eroded trust but also damaged relationships with external partners, undermining the sense of competence and relatedness crucial to effective teamwork. In other cases, shifts in management style following administrative changes left staff feeling betrayed, as freedoms and professional discretion were "slowly being taken away." These experiences reflect a pattern of active need thwarting in which leadership behaviors and institutional inaction collectively undermined autonomy, competence, and relatedness, driving emotional exhaustion and prompting many to disengage or leave the organization.

Compensation and Extrinsic Drivers

Although external motivators such as salary, benefits, and career advancement played a role in employee departures, participants' accounts revealed that these factors often interacted with deeper psychological frustrations rooted in thwarted autonomy and competence. For some, compensation changes served as the tipping point within an already strained environment. One participant explained that their departure followed the loss of a key benefit, "I no longer had kids in undergrad, which is pretty much the reason I wanted to work… it paid their tuition" (INT02),

highlighting how diminished extrinsic rewards removed the remaining justification to stay in an unsupportive context.

Others described leaving for positions “more aligned with long-term career aspirations,” where enhanced pay and recognition restored a sense of competence and control absent in their current roles. One participant reflected on moving to a new position with “almost a $20,000 increase, so it was a really big life change for me.” (INT03), underscoring how external validation through compensation could help reestablish feelings of efficacy and worth. For senior staff, the limited upward mobility of the smaller campus thwarted their growth-oriented needs, prompting transitions to larger institutions offering “better pay” and clearer career progression.

From an SDT perspective, while compensation is an extrinsic motivator, these departure decisions signify deeper efforts to reclaim autonomy and competence in professional environments that had continually undermined them. Leaving, in this sense, became not only a financial or career move but also a restorative act to reassert one’s agency and value.

One contrasting case warrants specific attention. Unlike the majority of participants who described systematic frustration across all three psychological needs, INT07 departed primarily for external opportunities rather than workplace dissatisfaction. This participant's department maintained a degree of structural independence from main campus governance, with greater discretion over local decision-making and resource allocation than was typical of other satellite campus units. Within the SDT framework, this structural independence appeared to function as a protective condition, preserving sufficient autonomy and competence satisfaction to prevent the motivational erosion described by other participants. This case does not contradict the broader pattern of need frustration; rather, it strengthens it, suggesting that when satellite campus units are afforded localized authority, the psychological conditions for retention can be maintained

even within a larger need-thwarting institutional environment.

Together, these findings reveal how the frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness operated not in isolation but as a compounding cycle, one shaped by the structural and organizational conditions examined in the discussion that follows.

Discussion

This qualitative study explored the workplace experiences of former administrative professionals at a higher education satellite campus to better understand the factors motivating voluntary turnover. The findings revealed widespread frustration of the three basic psychological needs outlined in Self-Determination Theory: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Across interviews, these unmet needs contributed to disempowerment, disengagement, and eventual attrition, amplified by organizational disrespect, structural deficits, leadership failures, and extrinsic factors. This discussion is organized into three sections. First, SDT Psychological Needs interpreted the frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the existing motivation and turnover literature. Second, Organizational Stressors examined the structural and extrinsic conditions that amplified need thwarting at the satellite campus. Third, Theoretical Analysis situates these patterns within broader SDT scholarship, addresses cross-cutting dynamics of power and neglect, and articulates the theoretical contributions emerging from this study.

SDT Psychological Needs

Frustrated Autonomy and Organizational Structures

Autonomy refers to employees' capacity to exercise choice and discretion in how they carry out their work. At the satellite campus, autonomy was consistently undermined by centralized control, top-down reorganizations conducted without staff input, and a pervasive

absence of local decision-making authority. Participants described a restrictive environment where routine matters had to be deferred to the main campus, resulting in operational delays and cumulative frustration.

This dynamic illustrates a form of organizational inequity, where the centralized bureaucratic structures of the institution systematically undermined the engagement of satellite personnel by stripping them of professional agency. This aligns with Van den Broeck et al.'s (2016) findings that top-down, controlling environments actively thwart autonomy, leading to diminished intrinsic motivation.

This organizational inequity was further evidenced by the implementation of flexible work policies. As noted in the 2025 CUPA-HR Employee Retention Survey, misalignment between actual and preferred work arrangements is a primary driver for higher education staff seeking new employment. In this case, the denial of remote options available to main-campus peers served as a definitive 'need thwarting' event (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Unlike need dissatisfaction where a preference is simply unmet, this disparity represents active need frustration which is when the institutional barrier explicitly blocked the participants' agency (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Such disparities signaled a lower institutional value for satellite employees and compromised organizational justice, transforming participants from active, autonomous contributors into passive actors (Karasek, 1979). This persistent autonomy frustration created a psychological toll that eroded trust and diminished intrinsic motivation, moving participants toward a state of amotivation and the eventual decision to leave the institution (Howard et al., 2016). While autonomy frustration established the structural conditions for disempowerment, participants' accounts revealed a parallel and equally pervasive frustration of competence, one that compounded the motivational decline already set in motion by the loss of agency.

Frustrated Competence and Career Development Gaps

Competence involves feeling effective, capable, and able to apply one's skills to meaningful challenges (Ryan & Deci, 2017). In this study, participants frequently highlighted a lack of adequate training, feedback, and opportunities for growth. Difficulty obtaining timely guidance from main campus colleagues created recurring barriers to task completion, leaving staff feeling isolated and unsupported. A lack of clear developmental pathways further exacerbated the problem, with some participants identifying career stagnation as the primary factor motivating their departure.

These experiences are consistent with prior work suggesting that insufficient training and limited feedback diminish perceptions of competence, which in turn reduce commitment and increase turnover risk (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Boredom, reported by several participants, was another outcome of unmet competence needs. Rather than providing opportunities for mastery and variety, many tasks were described as repetitive and unchallenging. This aligns with research on job design, which shows that monotonous roles promote disengagement by underutilizing employees' skills (Baker, 2014).

In effect, competence was frustrated not through overt criticism but through neglect, an absence of growth opportunities, recognition, and resource support. When employees are denied pathways for skill enhancement, voluntary exit becomes one of the few avenues to regain a sense of efficacy and professional momentum. The erosion of competence did not occur in isolation, it was reinforced by a simultaneous frustration of relatedness, as the structural and interpersonal conditions that blocked growth also severed the connections through which employees might otherwise have found support and belonging.

Frustrated Relatedness and Disconnection

Relatedness refers to the need for belonging, trust, and meaningful workplace relationships (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Feelings of isolation emerged strongly in participant accounts, both because of pandemic restrictions and due to the satellite campus's structural separation from the main institution. While physical distancing during COVID-19 exacerbated loneliness, participants also expressed enduring disconnection from peers and leadership. Generational differences on staff post-pandemic further complicated opportunities for camaraderie, sometimes leaving employees without a sense of common ground.

Communication barriers reinforced these relational challenges. Participants reported frequent failures to be informed about procedural changes from the main campus, creating both frustration and feelings of exclusion. Lack of transparent communication not only undermined competence (by impairing clarity of tasks) but also signaled that staff voices were neither prioritized nor valued. Prior research highlighted this pattern, showing how communication gaps foster perceptions of marginalization and weaken trust in leadership (Weaver & Yancey, 2010; Webster et al., 2014).

Within the theme of Frustrated Relatedness, the data revealed a pervasive sense of benign neglect. Participants described a form of 'institutional invisibility' where the geographic distance from the main campus translated into psychological distance from the university community. This neglect functioned as a direct thwarter of Relatedness; it was not merely that participants lacked social ties, but that they felt structurally excluded from the institutional 'we.' As one participant noted, the lack of communication from the center made them feel like an 'afterthought,' turning the satellite campus into an isolated outpost rather than a connected branch.

Collectively, these experiences indicate that relatedness was not actively cultivated at the

satellite campus. Instead, weak communication structures and limited social integration reinforced isolation and disconnection. In line with SDT, frustrated relatedness eroded motivation by preventing employees from experiencing belonging and institutional support essential for sustained engagement (Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Organizational Stressors

Beyond the frustration of basic psychological needs, participants described a set of organizational conditions that functioned as structural amplifiers, not merely additional sources of dissatisfaction but active mechanisms that deepened existing need thwarting and accelerated motivational decline. Three such amplifiers emerged across accounts: organizational disrespect and its psychological toll, satellite campus structural and resource deficits, and failures of organizational accountability.

Amplifiers of Need Thwarting: Organizational Conditions and Extrinsic Drivers

Organizational disrespect and the psychological toll of toxic supervision extended beyond poor management practice to constitute what SDT identifies as need thwarting, the active blocking of autonomy and relatedness through controlling, dismissive, or belittling treatment (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). As Pelletier (2010) documents, controlling organizational environments signal institutional indifference in ways that transform the workplace from a context for motivation into a source of psychological harm.

The structural conditions of the satellite campus generated a parallel set of competence frustrations. Reporting structures that diverged significantly from main campus norms, such as administrative units organized under divisions with no equivalent at the main campus, left staff navigating institutional processes without adequate guidance or authority. The result was a culture of forced generalism, in which employees were expected to absorb expanding

responsibilities across functional areas without the resources, role clarity, or decision-making authority necessary to develop genuine expertise. Forced generalism is theoretically significant because it frustrates competence not through overt criticism but through structural foreclosure, staff feel capable in the moment but see no path toward mastery or advancement, a distinction the quantitative findings of Study 2 later confirm. This condition is consistent with Kanter's (1977) documentation of structural powerlessness in organizational contexts, in which employees absorb expanding responsibilities without the authority, resources, or role clarity necessary to develop genuine expertise. This dynamic is particularly prevalent in peripheral organizational units with limited institutional standing.

Accountability failures compounded these conditions. Reorganizations conducted without staff input and communicated after the fact eroded the relatedness that might otherwise have buffered against competence and autonomy frustration. Staff were left without recourse or voice, and the institution's failure to acknowledge the human cost of these decisions signaled a systemic indifference to their well-being. Compensation gaps operated similarly, not merely as financial grievances but as institutional signals that satellite staff contributions were valued less than those of their main campus counterparts, a form of competence-based feedback that confirmed rather than countered the marginalization participants already felt (Deci et al., 2017).

Together these amplifiers, organizational disrespect, structural deficits, accountability failures, and compensation inequity, transformed what might have been manageable frustrations into conditions that made continued employment psychologically untenable. The decision to leave was experienced not as a career choice but as a necessary withdrawal from an environment that had systematically depleted the psychological resources required to sustain motivation and engagement. The cumulative picture that emerges is one of systematic institutional failure, not

isolated managerial shortcomings but structural and cultural conditions that reliably produced the circumstances for psychological need thwarting. The theoretical analysis that follows situates these patterns within the broader SDT organizational literature and articulates the constructs that this study's findings contribute to that scholarship.

Theoretical Analysis

Interplay of Needs Frustration and Implications

Although autonomy, competence, and relatedness represent analytically distinct domains within SDT, participants' experiences revealed how their frustration operated as a compounding cycle rather than a set of parallel grievances. Centralized control restricted autonomy, which in turn undermined competence by narrowing opportunities for initiative and self-directed problem-solving. Poor communication eroded relatedness while simultaneously contributing to role ambiguity that further dampened competence. The erosion of autonomy prevented the exercise of competence, and both conditions deepened the sense of institutional disconnection that frustrated relatedness. This progressively distanced employees from the motivational resources necessary to sustain engagement. Previous research on need thwarting has documented similar compounding dynamics, demonstrating that frustration across multiple SDT dimensions accelerates burnout and turnover more rapidly than frustration of any single need in isolation (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). The frustration of these three needs did not occur in isolation; rather, they functioned as a compounding cycle of demotivation in which the erosion of autonomy hampered the exercise of competence, further distancing employees from the institutional mission and the motivational resources necessary to sustain their engagement.

The Role of Asymmetric Power Dynamics and Organizational Inequity

The findings suggest that turnover at the satellite campus cannot be fully explained by

individual-level motivational decline alone; it is structurally produced by the asymmetric power relationship between the central institution and its peripheral units. When decision-making authority over work arrangements, resource allocation, and organizational restructuring is concentrated at the main campus, satellite staff are systematically denied the conditions essential for sustained motivation. This is not incidental to institutional design but is a part of it: the satellite campus model, as implemented here, structurally positions peripheral staff as recipients of centrally determined mandates rather than agents of their own professional environment.

This asymmetry operates across all three psychological needs simultaneously. Autonomy is frustrated directly, as staff lack meaningful discretion over routine operational decisions. Competence is frustrated structurally, through the forced generalism that results when staff must absorb expanding responsibilities without the authority or resources to develop genuine expertise. Relatedness is frustrated institutionally, as the geographic and organizational distance from the center renders satellite staff invisible in the decision-making processes that shape their work conditions. This dynamic is more fully examined in the following section on benign neglect. These compounding frustrations align with organizational justice research demonstrating that perceived procedural inequity erodes trust, diminishes commitment, and accelerates voluntary exit (Colquitt et al., 2013; Karasek, 1979).

Critically, this power asymmetry was not experienced by participants as overt hostility but as structural indifference, a feature of institutional architecture rather than individual managerial failure. This distinction has important theoretical implications: it suggests that interventions targeting individual supervisory behavior will have limited impact on retention if the structural conditions that concentrate authority at the center remain unchanged. Addressing asymmetric power dynamics requires institutional redesign, a conclusion that grounds the policy

recommendations of this study in structural rather than individual change.

The Role of Benign Neglect in Need Thwarting

Alongside the active constraints of asymmetric power, the findings reveal a second and theoretically distinct mechanism of need thwarting: benign neglect. Where asymmetric power operates through the deliberate concentration of decision-making authority, benign neglect operates through institutional inattention. Participants consistently described a sense of geographic invisibility in which delayed responses to site-specific problems, an absence of leadership presence, and a lack of tailored resources signaled that the satellite campus was not considered important by the central administration.

This form of neglect constitutes need thwarting because it actively withholds the conditions necessary for need satisfaction rather than merely failing to provide them (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). The distinction matters theoretically: need dissatisfaction occurs when supportive conditions are absent; need thwarting occurs when the organizational environment systematically prevents those conditions from forming. Benign neglect falls into the latter category because it is structural and patterned, not an occasional oversight but a reliable feature of how the institution relates to its peripheral units.

The primary need frustrated by benign neglect is relatedness. When staff perceive their campus as an institutional afterthought, the resulting sense of organizational invisibility erodes belonging and undermines the sense of being a valued contributor to the institutional mission. But benign neglect also frustrates competence. When central administration fails to respond to site-specific operational needs, staff are left navigating institutional processes without adequate support, undermining their capacity to perform effectively. It frustrates autonomy indirectly, as staff cannot exercise meaningful discretion over their work environment when the institutional

processes that shape that environment remain unresponsive to local conditions.

Benign neglect is theoretically significant beyond this study because it identifies a form of institutional harm that is invisible to standard organizational surveys. Instruments measuring need satisfaction capture what employees experience directly; they are less sensitive to what employees are systematically denied through structural inattention. This has direct implications for how institutions assess and respond to satellite campus retention challenges.

Theoretical Synthesis and Construct Discovery

The findings of this study advance SDT's organizational framework in two theoretically significant ways. First, they demonstrate that need thwarting in multi-campus institutional contexts operates through two analytically distinct mechanisms, asymmetric power dynamics and benign neglect; that existing SDT organizational research has not differentiated. Asymmetric power dynamics describes the active concentration of decision-making authority at the institutional center, which frustrates autonomy directly and competence structurally through the forced generalism it produces. Benign neglect describes the passive institutional inattention through which satellite staff are rendered organizationally invisible, a form of need thwarting that frustrates relatedness primarily but operates across all three needs by withholding the responsive institutional environment that need satisfaction requires. The passive, structural nature of this dynamic aligns with scholarship on the third dimension of power, in which dominance operates not through direct coercion or overt decision-making but through the systematic inattention that renders certain groups invisible within institutional processes (Lukes, 2005). Together these constructs suggest that need thwarting in peripheral organizational units is not simply a more intense version of the frustrations documented in centralized workplaces, but a qualitatively different phenomenon produced by geographic and administrative marginalization.

Second, the contrasting case identified in this study, in which a department that maintained structural independence appeared to buffer against need frustration. It provides preliminary evidence for a theoretical proposition with significant institutional design implications. In that localized autonomy can function as a protective condition against need thwarting in centralized multi-campus systems. When satellite units retain meaningful discretion over their operational environment, the psychological conditions for need satisfaction are preserved even within an otherwise centralizing institutional architecture. This suggests that the primary determinant of whether satellite campus staff experience need satisfaction or frustration is not individual resilience or managerial quality but the degree to which institutional design distributes rather than concentrates decision-making authority.

Taken together, these contributions extend SDT's organizational framework by identifying the structural conditions specific to peripheral institutional units, conditions that standard organizational surveys are poorly equipped to capture and that retention interventions focused on individual behavior are unlikely to address.

Transferability of Constructs

Before turning to policy and practice implications, the conditions under which these constructs are most analytically transferable warrant specific treatment, given the bounded single-case design of this study. The constructs identified in this study, asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, emerged from a bounded case with specific structural characteristics that shape where and when these patterns are most likely to appear. Transferability in qualitative research does not require identical contexts but rather sufficient structural similarity for the underlying mechanisms to operate comparably (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Merriam, 2009). Three structural conditions appear most critical for the applicability of

these findings to other institutional contexts.

The first is centralized governance with peripheral units. Asymmetric power dynamics requires a power differential produced by the concentration of decision-making authority at an institutional center. This condition is present not only in multi-campus university systems but in any large organization where geographically dispersed units operate under centrally determined mandates such as regional hospital networks, distributed government agencies, franchise educational systems, and corporate branch structures. The construct is least applicable in flat organizational structures where local units retain meaningful discretion.

The second is sole practitioner staffing. Forced generalism is most likely to emerge when staff must absorb multiple functional responsibilities without departmental redundancy, a condition that amplifies both competence frustration and the operational impact of each departure. This condition is characteristic of small satellite campuses but also applies to under-resourced departments, startup organizations, and any context where role boundaries are structurally absent rather than individually negotiated.

The third is institutional invisibility produced by geographic or organizational distance. Benign neglect requires sufficient distance, geographic, organizational, or both, between a peripheral unit and the institutional center that the peripheral unit's specific needs are not registered in central decision-making processes. This condition is present in geographically distributed systems but also in large bureaucratic organizations where certain departments or populations occupy structurally marginal positions regardless of physical proximity.

Collectively, these three conditions define the organizational profile within which the constructs of this study are most analytically applicable: centralized governance, sole practitioner staffing, and institutional invisibility. Institutions and researchers encountering two or more of

these conditions in combination should anticipate patterns of need frustration consistent with those documented here, even if the specific mechanisms differ in form.

Implications

Study 1 reveals how the systematic frustration of administrative professionals' basic psychological needs, particularly autonomy restrictions from centralized policies, competence frustration from multi-role demands without commensurate authority, and relatedness erosion from geographic and institutional isolation, drives voluntary turnover among satellite campus administrative professionals. Much of the existing turnover literature in higher education concentrates on faculty and frontline student services, leaving administrative professionals largely absent from the empirical record. By applying SDT to this population and context, this study surfaces the structural and relational mechanisms that broader survey designs are unlikely to capture. These findings provide a foundation for policy, practice, and research efforts aimed at reducing need frustration and improving retention across multi-campus systems.

Policy Implications

The findings point to three structural policy changes that institutions should prioritize. First, multi-campus systems should establish formal decentralization policies that grant satellite campus administrators explicit authority over routine operational decisions, such as flexible scheduling, local hiring, and budgeting within defined parameters, rather than requiring main campus approval for matters that could be resolved locally. Centralized control was the most consistently cited driver of autonomy frustration, and policy-level change is the only mechanism capable of addressing it systemically. Second, institutions should enforce equity in flexible work policies across campus locations. The denial of remote work options available to main campus peers in equivalent roles constitutes active need thwarting and compromises organizational

justice. Policy frameworks should require that flexibility arrangements be applied consistently across all campuses, or that location-based differences be formally justified and communicated. Third, institutions should develop structured career pathway policies specific to satellite campus roles, including defined advancement tracks, mentorship requirements, and professional development funding allocations. Career stagnation was identified as a primary competence frustrator, and without policy-level investment in growth infrastructure, practice-level interventions will have limited impact.

Practice Implications

At the supervisory and operational level, the findings identify three areas where day-to-day leadership practices can directly reduce need frustration. First, satellite campus leaders should adopt autonomy-supportive supervision practices, including soliciting staff input on procedural decisions, piloting flexible scheduling arrangements where policy permits, and providing employees with meaningful discretion in how they accomplish their work. Second, institutions should implement structured cross-campus communication protocols to address the relational isolation that satellite staff consistently described. These protocols should include regular cross-campus check-ins between satellite and main campus counterparts, shared governance participation for satellite staff, and transparent communication pipelines that ensure satellite employees are informed of procedural and policy changes before they take effect. Third, leaders should deploy brief, semester-based psychological needs assessments, such as pulse surveys measuring autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction, to identify early warning signs of need frustration before they escalate into turnover. When survey results reveal specific deficits, supervisors should co-create targeted action plans with their teams rather than applying generic retention strategies.

Research Implications

This study opens several productive lines of future inquiry. First, multi-site qualitative studies across different satellite campus systems would test the transferability of the constructs identified here, particularly benign neglect and asymmetric power dynamics, and determine whether these patterns are specific to R1 research universities or common across institutional types. Second, longitudinal designs tracking current satellite campus staff over 12 to 18 months would clarify the temporal relationships between need frustration and actual turnover, moving beyond the retrospective accounts that necessarily bounded this study (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Third, experimental or quasi-experimental studies could test the causal impact of specific autonomy-supportive interventions such as decentralized decision-making protocols or cross-campus mentorship programs on need satisfaction and retention outcomes, providing stronger evidence for the policy recommendations above. Finally, the contrasting case identified in this study, in which structural independence appeared to function as a protective condition against need frustration, warrant focused investigation. Future research should examine which specific features of departmental autonomy are most protective, and whether replicating those conditions at the institutional level can reduce satellite campus turnover at scale.

Conclusion

This qualitative case study examined the workplace experiences of nine former administrative professionals at a higher education satellite campus to understand the psychological and organizational factors driving their voluntary departure. The chronic frustration of basic psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, produced a state of amotivation in which turnover became a restorative act rather than a career choice. Decisions made at the main campus eroded morale at the satellite campus when communication

was lacking, and policy implementation was not clearly conveyed. The findings underscore that need frustration is not simply an individual experience, but a structural outcome, produced when institutional demands consistently exceed the psychological resources the organization provides. The departure of long-term administrative professionals compounds these conditions by eroding institutional memory and continuity, leaving remaining staff to absorb the operational gaps that follow. Ultimately, this study demonstrates that satellite campus turnover is not a problem of individual motivation but of institutional design. The constructs of asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect offer both a diagnostic language and a practical framework for institutions committed to building equitable, psychologically supportive environments across all their campuses.

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Examining Psychological Needs and Their Relationship to Turnover Intentions Among Administrative Staff: A Satellite and Main Campus Comparison

Abstract

Psychological need satisfaction and need frustration, as theorized by Self-Determination Theory's Basic Psychological Needs Theory, are the primary constructs through which organizational conditions drive administrative staff turnover in higher education. This cross-sectional study examined their independent and joint contributions to turnover intention among 447 administrative staff at a single R1 university and tested whether organizational stressors transmit their influence on turnover intention through psychological need processes. Hierarchical regression indicated that both need satisfaction ($\beta = -.372$, $p < .001$) and need frustration ($\beta = .339$, $p < .001$) emerged as significant independent predictors of turnover intention in the final model, with need frustration explaining significant incremental variance beyond need satisfaction and demographic controls ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). Parallel mediation analyses (PROCESS Model 4, 5,000 bootstrap samples) confirmed that organizational stressors: ineffective leadership, burnout, lack of career development, and work-life imbalance, influenced turnover intention through both pathways; however, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models. A secondary campus location comparison yielded no significant differences, indicating that psychological need thwarting operates institution-wide rather than as a satellite-specific phenomenon. These findings support a dual-process framework in which both reduced need support and active need thwarting contribute independently to turnover intention and demonstrate that retention efforts must eliminate structural need-thwarting conditions, not merely enhancing need-supportive ones.

Introduction

Administrative staff turnover and workforce instability remain pressing challenges across higher education institutions. Over half of higher education staff members are actively seeking new job opportunities, with retention, burnout, and workforce stability emerging as critical concerns at both the institutional and system level (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2025; Volt EDU, 2025). Yet the specific factors behind staff turnover and retention remain empirically underexamined. Salon (2026) established that former satellite campus administrative staff at a higher education institution experienced systematic frustration of autonomy, competence, and relatedness as primary drivers of departure, with structural conditions including centralized control, forced generalism, and institutional invisibility identified as the principal contributors to need frustration. What remains unknown in the literature is whether these experiences were specific to the satellite campus or reflect institution-wide patterns, and whether the psychological mechanisms identified through qualitative inquiry generalize across the broader administrative staff population in higher education. Although satellite and main campus staff both face retention pressures, the extent to which campus context differentially affects psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention has not been systematically tested, leading to the first research question.

RQ1: Do satellite and main campus administrative staff differ in their levels of psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention?

This campus comparison contextualizes the study's scope but does not define its primary contribution. The second research question addresses the limited knowledge about the social and psychological factors behind administrative staff intention to leave the university.

RQ2: To what extent do psychological need frustration and organizational stressors

predict turnover intention among administrative staff when controlling for demographic and contextual variables?

Literature Review

This literature review establishes the empirical and theoretical foundation for the quantitative questions this study addresses. The first section reviews research on administrative staff turnover in higher education, drawing from adjacent subgroups to identify the organizational conditions most consistently associated with departure. The second section addresses turnover intention as the behavioral outcome of interest and its relationship to psychological need processes. The third section examines organizational stressors as the structural conditions that transmit their influence on turnover intention through psychological need processes. The fourth section defines psychological need satisfaction and frustration as theoretically distinct constructs within Self-Determination Theory and reviews their organizational antecedents and outcomes. Together, these sections situate the study's hypotheses within both the empirical literature and the theoretical framework, and justify the analytical strategy used in this study.

Turnover in Higher Education

Administrative staff turnover in higher education carries significant institutional consequences, including disrupted services, eroded institutional knowledge, and recruitment and training costs (Bessette, 2020). These issues remain among the least empirically examined workforce challenges in the field (Graham, 2012; Szekeres, 2011). The literature that does exist concentrates predominantly on faculty and two adjacent administrative subgroups, student affairs professionals, and research administrators (Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser, 2004). Their workplace experiences provide the best available evidence for patterns relevant to the broader

administrative population but whose organizational contexts differ in important ways from the frontline administrative staff this study examines. This body of research has identified a cluster of organizational conditions associated with turnover intention such as supervisory support, advancement opportunities, workload demands, and institutional recognition (Marshall et al., 2016; Ryan & Deci, 2017).

Among student affairs professionals, Mullen et al. (2018) found that job stress and burnout significantly predicted turnover intention in a sample of 789 professionals, with institutional factors including excessive workload, low pay, and poor supervisory support emerging as primary drivers. Critically, enhanced supervisory support was identified as the single most influential retention lever. This finding maps directly onto SDT's autonomy-supportive supervision construct and suggests that the psychological pathway between supervision and retention warrants formal testing in administrative populations more broadly.

Research administrator populations show a similar pattern with a theoretically important contrast. Welch and Brantmeier (2021) found that dedicated supervisory and upper management support was the primary motivator for retention among 143 research administrators. A finding that differs from student affairs populations where supervisory support was absent rather than present. This contrast suggests that the presence or absence of autonomy-supportive conditions may be the more reliable differentiator between high and low turnover risk across administrative subgroups. The direction of the supervisory support effect depends on whether the organizational environment is actively thwarting or merely failing to provide that support.

Career development barriers represent the most consistently documented predictor of voluntary turnover across administrative subgroups and the one most directly relevant to the satellite campus context this dissertation examines. Survey data indicate that 35.8% of higher

education personnel desired promotion or greater responsibility (Bichsel et al., 2023), and the absence of mentoring and professional development pathways has been associated with increased departure risk across multiple studies (Davis et al., 2022; Donnelly & McSweeney, 2011; Selesho & Naile, 2014). Jo's (2008) examination of mid-level women administrators at an Ivy League university is particularly instructive: limited advancement opportunities, supervisory dissatisfaction, and scheduling inflexibility emerged as the primary departure factors, a combination that maps directly onto SDT's three needs of autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

Career barriers frustrate competence by blocking the professional growth and mastery employees need to feel effective. Poor supervision frustrates autonomy by removing meaningful agency over one's professional environment. Institutional disregard frustrates relatedness by signaling that staff contributions are neither valued nor visible. Jo (2008) further identified a cascading effect in which upper-level departures concentrated expanded responsibilities onto remaining lower-level staff. This occurred to simultaneously frustrate competence through role overload and autonomy through the loss of meaningful control over workload demands. This was identified in previous research as forced generalism in the satellite campus context (Salon, 2026).

What this body of research has not established is the relative predictive weight of each need frustration dimension on turnover intention when measured concurrently. In addition, whether need frustration carries greater predictive weight than need satisfaction in administrative populations. Furthermore, whether need frustration mediates the relationship between the organizational conditions this literature consistently identifies such as supervisory support, career development, workload, and institutional recognition, and turnover intentions.

Turnover Intention

Turnover intention is defined as an employee's conscious and deliberate willingness to leave their current organization in the near future (Tett & Meyer, 1993). It represents the final cognitive stage in a multi-step withdrawal process that includes thinking of quitting and the intent to search for alternative employment and is widely regarded as the proximal psychological precursor to actual voluntary departure (Roodt, 2004). In organizational research, turnover intention is the variable most consistently and strongly predictive of actual turnover behavior, with meta-analytic evidence establishing it as the single best psychological predictor of voluntary exit across industries and organizational contexts (Du Plooy & Roodt, 2010).

Turnover intention is related to, and distinguishable from, behavioral disengagement or "quiet quitting", a state in which employees remain physically present but withdraw psychological investment from institutional goals. Where quiet quitting reflects a form of motivational withdrawal within the employment relationship, turnover intention reflects movement toward exiting from it, representing a more advanced stage of the demotivation process SDT describes as amotivation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Within an SDT framework, turnover intention is contributed to by the chronic frustration of basic psychological needs, which depletes the intrinsic motivation and organizational identification necessary for sustained engagement and makes voluntary exit appear as a restorative rather than merely an economic decision (Deci et al., 2017; Richer et al., 2002). Richer et al. (2002) demonstrated in an organizational sample that autonomous motivation significantly reduced turnover intentions and that autonomy-supportive supervisory environments were associated with lower voluntary turnover, providing direct evidence that the pathway from need frustration to exit intent operates through motivational mechanisms rather than through rational calculation alone.

In the higher education administrative context, turnover intention has been documented as a significant outcome of job stress, burnout, and inadequate supervisory support (Mullen et al., 2018; Winfield & Paris, 2022). Critically, these studies establish turnover intention as the measurable expression of the psychological conditions this study examines, need frustration functions as the upstream mechanism, organizational stressors function as the structural contributors, and turnover intention is the outcome through which both processes are operationalized and tested.

The Role of Organizational Stressors

Organizational stressors are the specific environmental conditions that serve as the primary structural contributors to both the frustration of psychological needs and the development of turnover intention. They are not independent causes of departure but rather the institutional mechanisms through which need frustration is produced, making them the appropriate independent variables through which to test the mediating role of psychological need processes (Deci et al., 2017; Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

In the context of higher education administrative staff, the organizational conditions most consistently documented as stressors are ineffective leadership, lack of career goal support, work-life balance constraints, and burnout (Marshall et al., 2016; Rosser, 2004). Each map onto a specific SDT need dimension. Ineffective and passive-avoidant leadership contributes to autonomy frustration by removing meaningful discretion and psychological safety from employees' daily work environments (Deci et al., 2017). Lack of career goal support contributes to competence frustration by blocking the professional development and mastery experiences through which employees develop genuine expertise rather than merely accumulating tasks. Work-life balance constraints contribute to autonomy frustration by stripping employees of

meaningful choice over how and where they perform their work, particularly when those constraints are applied inequitably across comparable employee groups (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Within the SDT framework, burnout is not an independent stressor but a downstream consequence of chronic need thwarting, the state of psychological exhaustion that occurs when the organizational environment has systematically depleted the resources employees need to sustain motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Each of these conditions represents a structural pathway through which organizational stressors transmit their influence on turnover intention, and the central question this study addresses is whether that transmission operates through psychological need frustration more strongly than through need satisfaction. Understanding how that transmission operates requires first establishing what psychological need satisfaction and frustration are and why they function as distinct rather than equivalent mechanisms. These stressors are not, however, independent causes of departure. Their influence on turnover intention operates through a mediating psychological process, one that SDT's distinction between need satisfaction and need frustration is uniquely positioned to theorize.

Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration

Within the framework of Self-Determination Theory, psychological need satisfaction is defined as the nutritive state in which an individual's innate requirements for autonomy, competence, and relatedness are fulfilled by the social environment (Ryan & Deci, 2017). Autonomy refers to experiencing self-choice and volition in one's actions; competence to feeling effective and capable in one's work; and relatedness to a sense of belonging and connection with others. When these needs are consistently met, employees demonstrate higher autonomous motivation, greater work engagement, stronger organizational commitment, and lower withdrawal intentions (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Van den Broeck et al., 2016). The organizational

conditions most likely to produce need satisfaction include autonomy-supportive leadership, access to skill development and growth opportunities, and relational environments characterized by trust and inclusion, conditions that signal to employees that their agency, competence, and belonging are institutionally valued (Deci et al., 2017; Gagné & Deci, 2005).

Psychological need frustration, however, is not merely the absence of satisfaction but a theoretically and empirically distinct state in which these needs are actively undermined or thwarted by structural and interpersonal forces (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Vansteenkiste and Ryan (2013) established that need frustration and need dissatisfaction produce qualitatively different motivational consequences: dissatisfaction describes conditions in which supportive resources are absent, while frustration describes conditions in which organizational structures actively block need fulfillment through controlling, coercive, or dismissive mechanisms. Need frustration is contributed to by controlling environments characterized by centralized power and rigid surveillance that block employees' sense of agency, by structural barriers that prevent skill application and mastery, and by organizational conditions that produce isolation or institutional invisibility (Vansteenkiste et al., 2020). Across organizational contexts, need frustration is related to a distinct set of maladaptive outcomes, including defensive work behaviors, psychological withdrawal, burnout, and turnover intention, that satisfaction-only frameworks systematically underdetect (Bartholomew et al., 2011; Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

The empirical independence of these two constructs has been formally established. Need satisfaction and need frustration are not opposite ends of a single continuum; they are distinct constructs with independent predictive contributions to motivational and behavioral outcomes (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). This means that an employee can simultaneously experience moderate need satisfaction in some domains while experiencing active frustration in others, and

that measuring satisfaction alone will underestimate the psychological conditions driving turnover by missing the thwarting component entirely. The Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS; Chen et al., 2015) was specifically developed to capture both constructs across all three need dimensions, providing the measurement precision this study requires. Need frustration, particularly autonomy frustration, has been found to carry greater independent predictive weight for burnout and turnover intention than need satisfaction across organizational samples, a pattern this study tests in the higher education administrative context (Van den Broeck et al., 2016; Vansteenkiste et al., 2020).

Rationale and Hypothesis

The H1 hypotheses are grounded in the satellite campus literature and the qualitative findings of previous research (Salon, 2026). Previous research indicates that satellite campus employees often experience lower autonomy, fewer resources, and less decision-making authority than their main campus counterparts, with centrally managed programs limiting access to training and professional development opportunities that support psychological need satisfaction (Fraser & Stott, 2015). This was confirmed and deepened as former satellite campus staff consistently describing centralized control, limited professional development, and geographic isolation as the primary structural conditions producing need frustration in their daily work (Salon, 2026). The H1 hypotheses test whether these qualitatively identified conditions are detectable as measurable differences between satellite and main campus staff on validated SDT instruments. However, given that the qualitative phase identified satellite-specific mechanisms at the level of operational experience rather than aggregate psychological magnitude, null findings on standardized instruments would also be theoretically interpretable as evidence that need thwarting operates institution-wide rather than as a campus-specific phenomenon.

H1a: Satellite campus staff will report significantly lower psychological need satisfaction (autonomy, competence, relatedness) than main campus staff.

H1b: Satellite campus staff will report significantly higher psychological need frustration (autonomy, competence, relatedness) than main campus staff.

H1c: Satellite campus staff will report significantly higher turnover intentions than main campus staff.

The H2 hypotheses are grounded in the psychological need frustration literature reviewed in the preceding section. Van den Broeck et al. (2016) established that need frustration predicts burnout and turnover intention across organizational contexts, with autonomy frustration emerging as the strongest individual predictor, and that need frustration and need satisfaction operate as distinct constructs with independent predictive contributions rather than as opposite ends of a single continuum. Vansteenkiste and Ryan (2013) established that need frustration produces motivational consequences more severe than need dissatisfaction alone, providing the theoretical basis for expecting need frustration to explain incremental variance in turnover intention over and above need satisfaction. The organizational stressor literature reviewed in the preceding section identifies burnout, ineffective leadership, lack of career development, and work-life balance constraints as the institutional conditions most likely to produce need frustration among administrative staff. This provides the basis for testing whether need frustration mediates the relationship between those conditions and turnover intention. The H2 hypotheses test these relationships:

H2a: Psychological need frustration will be significantly positively associated with turnover intention when controlling for need satisfaction.

H2b: Psychological need frustration will explain significant incremental variance in

turnover intention over and above need satisfaction.

H2c: The relationship between organizational stressors and turnover intention will be significantly mediated by psychological need frustration and need satisfaction as parallel pathways, with the indirect effect of need frustration larger than that of need satisfaction.

Organizational stressors are specified as the independent variable because they represent the proximal structural mechanisms through which institutional conditions produce psychological need thwarting, as identified by Salon (2026); campus location was examined as an alternative IV but was not used because no significant total effect of location on turnover intention was detected, a prerequisite for valid mediation testing (Hayes, 2022).

Methods

Cross-sectional Survey

This study employed a comparative cross-sectional survey design to test two hypotheses: whether satellite and main campus administrative staff differ in psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention (RQ1), and whether psychological needs and organizational factors predict turnover intention when controlling for demographic and contextual variables (RQ2). A cross-sectional design is appropriate because the study's purpose is to document the current distribution of these psychological and organizational conditions across a defined population at a single institution, not to track change over time or establish experimental causation. This design built directly on previous qualitative findings by testing whether the patterns identified through nine retrospective interviews generalize quantitatively across the broader current administrative staff population. The selection of a specific institutional site for this generalization was itself a methodological decision, one that required a pairing capable of isolating the satellite campus conditions Study 1 identified as the primary drivers of

need frustration.

Site Selection: The Nested Case Pair

This study utilized a purposive nested case design focusing on one main campus and its corresponding satellite campus within a single R1 university (Carnegie Classification, 2025). This specific pairing provided a natural control for institutional variables; both sites operate under identical HR policies, benefit structures, and overarching mission mandates, allowing geographic and administrative distance to function as the primary differentiating condition between groups. Holding institutional context constant in this way isolates the satellite campus structural conditions identified earlier with centralized control, resource asymmetry, and geographic isolation, as the variables most likely to produce differential patterns of psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, and turnover intention (Salon, 2026). Single-institution comparative designs of this kind capture context-specific mechanisms that multi-institutional surveys, which aggregate across structurally diverse campuses, are unlikely to detect. This makes the design particularly well suited to testing whether the qualitatively identified satellite campus dynamics hold at the population level.

Data Collection

Administrative staff are defined as non-faculty employees who provide operational, academic support, student services, or administrative functions within a higher education institution. The target population included professional staff, support staff, and administrative personnel across all departments and service areas at the satellite campus, with the main campus serving as a comparative group. A census sampling approach was employed through the Qualtrics system using a minimum of 3,669 institutional staff emails to minimize sampling bias and maximize representation. The inclusion criteria consisted of current administrative staff

employees with access to institutional email. Exclusion criteria were faculty members and student employees. Based on prior research, an expected response rate of 52.7% (SD = 20.4%) was anticipated, yielding a sufficiently powered sample for detecting medium effect sizes in multiple regression analyses (Baruch & Holtom, 2008; Cohen, 1992). Follow-up reminder emails were sent biweekly until adequate participation was achieved. Missing data was handled using multiple imputations to reduce bias.

Participant Selection Criteria

Inclusion criteria required participants to hold frontline administrative titles, Administrative Assistant, Coordinator, Specialist, or Manager below the Assistant Director level, to be actively employed as of January 2026, and to be present on the institutional email listing (N = 3,968). Personnel with titles of Assistant Director and above were excluded (N = 388, 9.8% of the original listing), producing a final survey target population of N = 3,580.

This exclusion maintained conceptual and methodological alignment with the study's focus on frontline administrative turnover. Leadership roles serve as primary architects of organizational strategy, structure, and climate, while non-leadership staff operate within those conditions and thus directly reflect workplace impacts on retention. Including upper management would confuse those who set conditions with those who experience them, obscuring frontline-specific patterns and complicating causal inferences about leadership effects. Additionally, Self-Determination Theory (SDT) research shows lower-level staff frequently attribute thwarted psychological needs, autonomy, competence, relatedness, to higher-level decisions like top-down policies, resource allocation, or cultural directives (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Gagné, 2003). Excluding Assistant Director–level and higher roles isolated these leadership-driven conditions as explanatory factors. With the target population defined and leadership roles excluded to preserve

the frontline administrative focus, instrument selection proceeded from the qualitative findings. This ensures that the scales deployed measure the specific psychological and organizational conditions that former satellite campus staff identified as primary drivers of their departure.

Measures and Instruments

Scale Selection Based on Qualitative Findings

Basic Psychological Need Satisfaction and Frustration Scale (BPNSFS). The 12-item shortened BPNSFS (Chen et al., 2015), reduced from the original 24-item instrument, was used to assess both psychological need satisfaction and need frustration across three dimensions: autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Each dimension is represented by two satisfaction and two frustration items. Sample items include "I feel free to do things my own way" (autonomy satisfaction) and "I feel forced to do things I wouldn't freely choose to do" (autonomy frustration). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). Composite scores for need satisfaction and need frustration were calculated by averaging the six satisfaction items and six frustration items, respectively, with higher scores indicating greater satisfaction or frustration. Need satisfaction and need frustration served as the two primary predictor constructs in all subsequent analyses, with need satisfaction entered in Step 2 of the hierarchical regression and need frustration entered in Step 3 to test its incremental contribution beyond satisfaction. The shortened version demonstrates acceptable reliability and factorial validity comparable to the full scale, with subscale alphas ranging from .64 to .89 (Chen et al., 2015); internal consistency in the current study was $\alpha = .743$ to .875.

Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI). Burnout was measured using a 4-item subset of the MBI (Maslach, Jackson, & Leiter, 1996), capturing the exhaustion dimension. A sample item is "I feel burned out from my work." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *never*, 5 =

always). A total score was calculated by averaging the four items, with higher scores indicating greater burnout. Prior research reports reliability ranging from α = .60 to .80 (Maslach et al., 1996); internal consistency in the current study was α = .720.

Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ). Leadership effectiveness was assessed using a 4-item passive-avoidant subscale of the MLQ (Avolio & Bass, 2004). A sample item is "My supervisor avoids getting involved when important issues arise." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (0 = *strongly disagree*, 4 = *strongly agree*). A total score was calculated by averaging all items, with higher scores indicating greater passive-avoidant leadership. The subscale demonstrates good reliability (α = .70–.72; Avolio & Bass, 2004); internal consistency in the current study was α = .946.

Organizational Career Growth Scale (OCGS). Career goal support was measured using a 3-item subset of the OCGS (Weng & McElroy, 2012), drawn from the career goal progress and professional ability development subscales. A sample item is "My current job helps me to achieve career goals I value." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A total score was calculated by averaging responses, with higher scores indicating greater perceived career growth. Prior reliability ranges from α = .82 to .88 (Weng & McElroy, 2012); internal consistency in the current study was α = .876.

Work/Life Balance Self-Assessment Scale (WLB). Work-life balance was measured using a 3-item version of the WLB Self-Assessment Scale (Hayman, 2005), following removal of one item (Q7_1) due to a low corrected item-total correlation (.33). A sample item is "I find it difficult to relax during time away from work." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). A total score was calculated by averaging responses, with higher scores indicating greater work-life imbalance. Prior reliability ranges from α = .79 to .84

(Hayman, 2005); internal consistency in the current study was α = .801.

Turnover Intention Scale (TIS). Turnover intention was measured using two items retained from the 4-item TIS (Roodt, 2004) following CFA-guided item refinement. A sample item is "I intend to leave this organization within the next year." Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*). One item was reverse scored prior to analysis. A total score was calculated by averaging the two retained items, with higher scores indicating stronger turnover intention. Prior reliability ranges from α = .80 to .85 (Bothma & Roodt, 2004); internal consistency in the current study was α = .842.

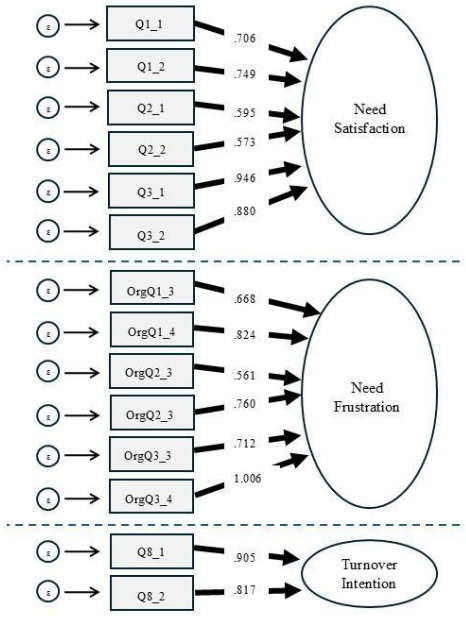
Data Analysis

To establish structural validity prior to hypothesis testing, a confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) was conducted using Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimation, which is robust for ordinal Likert data (Muthén, 1984; Flora & Curran, 2004). Because the primary hypotheses focus on the distinct roles of psychological need fulfillment and organizational outcomes, the focal measurement model specified a core three-factor structure: psychological need satisfaction, psychological need frustration, and turnover intention (**Figure 3**). This primary three-factor model demonstrated excellent fit to the data (CFI = .995, TLI = .991, RMSEA = .026 [.004, .041], SRMR = .020), with all factor loadings statistically significant at $p < .001$, confirming the empirical distinctiveness of these focal constructs. To preserve narrative clarity and prevent model over-parameterization in the primary text, more granular measurement structures were relegated to supplementary appendices. Specifically, a seven-factor model testing the isolated subscales of autonomy, competence, and relatedness is detailed in Appendix B (Table B1), and a comprehensive 12-factor model validating the operational independence of the underlying organizational stressors is reported in Appendix B (Table B2). Following validation

of the core three-factor structure, composite scores were constructed by averaging items within their respective validated scales to proceed with hierarchical regression and path analysis.

Figure 3

Confirmatory Factor Analysis



Note. Three-factor confirmatory factor analysis measurement model ($N = 451$). Standardized factor loadings λ are presented for all indicator-factor relationships. Observed indicators represent item pairings for psychological need satisfaction (Q1_1 through Q3_2), psychological need frustration (OrgQ1_3 through OrgQ3_4), and retained indicators for turnover intention (Q8_1, Q8_2). ε = measurement error term. Fit indices: CFI = .995, TLI = .991, RMSEA = .026 [.004, .041], SRMR = .020. All factor loadings are statistically significant at $p < .001$. Estimation conducted using Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) in Jamovi.

Following descriptive and bivariate correlation analyses, a series of multivariate analyses were executed to test the primary hypotheses. Independent samples *t*-tests with Cohen's *d* effect

sizes evaluated campus differences across primary constructs (H1a–H1c). A three-stage hierarchical multiple regression examined the predictive utility of basic psychological needs on turnover intention (H2a and H2b). Finally, parallel mediation analyses using Hayes' PROCESS macro (Model 4; Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples evaluated the indirect pathways between organizational stressors, need states, and turnover intentions (H2c). Within this analytical framework, burnout was modeled as an independent variable alongside the structural organizational stressors. While burnout is conceptualized within the overarching theoretical framework of this dissertation as a downstream consequence of chronic need thwarting rather than an independent environmental stressor, this specific modeling decision was necessitated by sample size constraints relative to the extreme parameter demands of a fully sequential latent mediation model. Modeling burnout in this position ensures a highly stringent test of Self-Determination Theory pathways by demonstrating whether the indirect effects of need satisfaction and need frustration on turnover intention remain robust when controlling for an established affective strain construct. This structural limitation and its theoretical implications are addressed fully in the Limitations section.

Validity

Construct validity was established through confirmatory factor analysis, which verified that each scale's items loaded significantly onto their hypothesized latent factors prior to hypothesis testing. This provides the evidence that the instruments measured their intended psychological constructs rather than other constructs. Statistical conclusion validity was supported using appropriate analytical procedures for each research question: independent samples t-tests with effect size reporting for group comparisons, hierarchical regression for predictive modeling, and bootstrapped parallel mediation for indirect effect estimation. External

validity was limited by the single-institution design, which prioritized internal contextual control over generalizability. A deliberate trade-off that enabled isolation of satellite campus structural conditions as the primary differentiating variable but restricted direct generalization to other institutional types or contexts. Scale reliability, including internal consistency coefficients and the psychometric rationale for shortened versions, is addressed in the following section.

Scale Reduction Rationale

The selection of shortened scale versions was driven by three methodological considerations, each grounded in established psychometric practice.

The first was survey burden management. The combined instrument included six validated multi-item scales. Deploying full versions would have exceeded 100 items, requiring an estimated 25–30 minutes to complete. Research on survey design consistently demonstrates that response rates and data quality decline as instrument length increases, particularly in organizational settings where participants complete surveys during work hours (Credé & Harms, 2015). Shortened versions were therefore adopted to maximize participation and response quality across the $N = 3{,}580$ target population.

The second was construct efficiency. For the BPNSFS, the 12-item shortened version validated by Chen et al. (2015) was selected because it captures both satisfaction and frustration across all three psychological need dimensions, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, while reducing the full 24-item instrument by half. Chen et al. (2015) demonstrated that the shortened version maintains acceptable reliability and factorial validity comparable to the full scale, with subscale Cronbach's alphas consistently meeting the .70 threshold across organizational samples. For the remaining scales, four-item versions were selected based on prior psychometric evidence demonstrating that these subsets reliably capture the primary construct variance of their full

versions (Avolio & Bass, 2004; Hayman, 2005; Maslach et al., 1996; Roodt, 2004; Weng & McElroy, 2012).

The third consideration was sequential design alignment. Earlier research identified specific manifestations of each psychological need, autonomy frustration expressed through centralized control and scheduling inflexibility, competence frustration through stalled career development and forced generalism, and relatedness frustration through geographic isolation and institutional invisibility (Salon, 2026). Item selection within each shortened scale was guided by correspondence to these qualitatively identified themes, ensuring that the survey instrument measured the specific conditions most relevant to the satellite campus population rather than applying a generic organizational battery. This alignment between qualitative findings and quantitative measurement is the defining methodological feature of an exploratory sequential design and directly supports construct validity by grounding item selection in participant-derived evidence (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The following section addresses positionality considerations arising from conducting this research within the researcher's own institutional context, a factor with direct relevance to both data collection integrity and the interpretation of finding.

Positionality

As a current administrative staff employee in higher education, I brought an insider perspective to this research. My professional role provided firsthand experience with the types of organizational dynamics that influence administrative staff, which gave me unique insights into the context I studied. This insider perspective allowed for better familiarity with institutional processes, structures, and workflows that an external researcher might not be aware of. However, this proximity to the topic and participants may have introduced potential challenges. My own

experiences with autonomy, competence, and relatedness within the institution may have influenced how I interpreted my findings. Additionally, the participants may have recognized or had a relationship with me which may have affected their willingness to share honest feedback while completing the survey. To mitigate these risks, I have implemented several safeguards such as an anonymous survey, clear separation of my duties as an administrative staff and a researcher and acknowledging that my perspective is only one of many within the institution. I have also practiced reflexivity throughout the process and have emphasized confidentiality and voluntary participation throughout the study. Acknowledging both the advantages and challenges of insider research, these safeguards were designed to ensure that proximity to the institutional context strengthened rather than compromised the integrity of the findings.

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for human subject research and received Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval prior to data collection. The IRB review evaluated participant protection, risk assessment, and data handling procedures. Before participating, all respondents were provided an electronic informed consent, which detailed the study's purpose, the voluntary nature of participation, and the right to withdraw at any time without penalty.

Participant privacy was protected through multiple technical and procedural safeguards. Responses were collected anonymously via a survey instrument with IP tracking disabled to prevent individual identification. To further protect professional standing, the demographic section included "Prefer not to respond" options, which allowed participants to control their level of disclosure. Furthermore, no data were shared with institutional administrators or used for employment-related decisions. All data were used exclusively for academic research, including

dissertation writing and potential peer-reviewed publications, and remained stored on an encrypted server with restricted access in accordance with IRB-mandated data protection protocols. These safeguards ensured the protection of participant welfare while enabling meaningful research contributions.

Limitations

Several methodological boundaries provide important context for interpreting the findings of this study.

Statistical Power and Campus Comparisons A post-hoc power analysis using G*Power (Faul et al., 2007) clarified the interpretive boundaries of the campus comparison findings. For H1, a two-tailed independent samples t-test was conducted due to the unequal group sizes (Main $N = 407$; Satellite $N = 40$). The analysis demonstrated near-zero power to detect small effects ($d = .20$, power = .226) but excellent power for medium ($d = .50$, power = .853) and large effects ($d = .80$, power = .998). Consequently, while the results provide reasonable evidence against major campus-level differences, they remain inconclusive regarding subtle variations. This distinction is theoretically meaningful: the absence of large differences suggests that need thwarting operates as a systemic, institution-wide mechanism, while undetected small differences may still reflect the localized, satellite-specific stressors identified in prior qualitative research (Salon, 2026) that survey data tends to smooth over. For H2, an F-test framework for R^2 deviation from zero with 12 predictors across the total sample ($N = 447$) demonstrated an achieved power of small effects ($f^2 = .02$, power = .434), excellent power for medium ($f^2 = .15$, power = .999), and ($f^2 = .35$, power = 1.000) for large structural effects, confirming the psychometric reliability of the full hierarchical model.

Research Design and Bias The cross-sectional nature of the survey limits the ability to

infer causality, as the temporal relationship between psychological states and the actual act of turnover cannot be established. Furthermore, the single-source, self-report design introduces the potential for common method bias (CMB), which can inflate correlations (Podsakoff et al., 2003). To mitigate this, the study utilized an anonymous design and focused on conceptually distinct constructs, measuring the gap between structural stressors and internal frustration, which are less susceptible to "halo effects" than general attitude surveys. While CMB cannot be entirely ruled out, these procedural safeguards help preserve the validity of the observed relationships.

Sampling and Engagement Generalizability is constrained by the focus on a single large public institution. A particular concern is the satellite subgroup response rate ($N = 40$, approx. 5%), which was lower than the institutional average. This low engagement may itself be a symptom of the 'benign neglect' identified by Salon (2026); the staff most affected by institutional disengagement may be the least likely to respond to centralized HR communications. This potential non-response bias suggests that the data may underrepresent the most severe cases of need frustration.

Measurement and Modeling In order to reduce participant burden, shortened 12-item scales were used. While these demonstrated robust reliability, the reduction from the full 24-item BPNSFS may omit certain nuances of need satisfaction. In addition, the complexity of the hypothesized structural model relative to the sample size precluded a fully latent second-order structural equation model. Therefore, the study adopted the Anderson and Gerbing (1988) two-step approach, separating measurement validation (CFA) from structural testing (hierarchical regression and mediation). While methodologically defensible, future research with larger samples would enable simultaneous estimation of all parameters for even more precise results.

A further modeling consideration concerns the theoretical positioning of burnout within

the parallel mediation analyses. Throughout this dissertation, burnout is theorized as a downstream consequence of chronic psychological need thwarting rather than an independent organizational stressor, consistent with SDT's organizational framework (Deci et al., 2017). However, the parallel mediation analyses modeled burnout as an independent variable predicting turnover intention through need satisfaction and need frustration as mediators. This analytical decision was driven by the need to test whether burnout's influence on turnover intention operates through psychological need processes, which the analysis confirms, but it creates a theoretical tension: if burnout is itself produced by need frustration, then the model positions a consequence of need frustration as a predictor of it. A more fully specified model would position burnout as a mediator between distal organizational conditions, such as workload demands and leadership climate, and psychological need constructs, with need frustration then predicting turnover intention. The current design does not permit this level of model complexity given sample size constraints relative to the number of latent constructs (Kline, 2016). Future research with larger samples should test this more theoretically precise sequential mediation model, which would more accurately reflect SDT's positioning of burnout as a structural indicator that needs frustration has reached a threshold sufficient to exhaust intrinsic motivation.

Results

Measurement Validation

Prior to hypothesis testing, a seven-factor confirmatory factor analysis (DWLS estimation; Hu & Bentler, 1999) confirmed the empirical distinctiveness of psychological need satisfaction and need frustration, the two primary predictor constructs in this study, and turnover intention as separate latent constructs. The model demonstrated excellent fit, and the factor intercorrelation matrix confirmed that satisfaction and frustration factors within each need

dimension correlated negatively with one another, supporting their treatment as theoretically and empirically distinct composites rather than opposite ends of a single continuum (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Full model fit statistics, factor loadings, and the measurement model diagram are reported in Appendix B.

Preliminary Analysis

Demographics Descriptives

A total of 447 administrative staff participated, with the majority at the Main Campus (*N* = 407, 91.1%) and a smaller Satellite Campus subgroup (*N* = 40, 8.9%). Demographic characteristics are summarized in **Table 4**. Most participants were female (68.9%), and the sample spanned all tenure ranges, with the Main Campus skewing toward early-career staff (49.6% with 1–4 years) and the Satellite Campus reflecting greater mid-tenure stability (35.0% with 5–10 years). These demographic characteristics were entered as Step 1 controls in the hierarchical regression to isolate the independent contributions of need satisfaction and need frustration to turnover intention in subsequent analyses.

Table 4
Sample Demographics and Characteristics

Characteristic	Total *N* (%)	Main Campus *N* (%)	Satellite Campus *N* (%)
Gender			
Male	126 (28.2%)	116 (28.5%)	10 (25.0%)
Female	308 (68.9%)	280 (68.8%)	28 (70.0%)
Non-binary	8 (1.8%)	7 (1.7%)	1 (2.5%)
Prefer not to say	5 (1.1%)	4 (1.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Age			
18-24 years	15 (3.4%)	14 (3.4%)	1 (2.5%)
25-40 years	174 (38.9%)	155 (38.1%)	19 (47.5%)
41-56 years	173 (38.7%)	161 (39.6%)	12 (30.0%)
57 years or more	77 (17.2%)	69 (17.0%)	8 (20.0%)
Prefer not to say	8 (1.8%)	8 (2.0%)	0 (0.0%)
Education			

High School	47 (10.5%)	43 (10.6%)	4 (10.0%)
Associate's Degree	52 (11.6%)	45 (11.1%)	7 (17.5%)
Bachelor's Degree	155 (34.7%)	139 (34.2%)	16 (40.0%)
Master's Degree	150 (33.6%)	140 (34.4%)	10 (25.0%)
Doctorate Degree	38 (8.5%)	36 (8.8%)	2 (5.0%)
Prefer not to say	5 (1.1%)	4 (1.0%)	1 (2.5%)
Position			
Executive/Administrative	212 (47.6%)	192 (47.2%)	20 (51.3%)
Support/Service	166 (37.3%)	156 (38.4%)	10 (25.6%)
Clerical & Paraprofessional	31 (7.0%)	25 (6.2%)	6 (15.4%)
Skilled Crafts	25 (5.6%)	25 (6.2%)	0 (0.0%)
Service/Maintenance	11 (2.5%)	8 (2.0%)	3 (7.7%)
Tenure			
Less than 1 year	62 (13.9%)	59 (14.5%)	3 (7.5%)
1-4 years	216 (48.3%)	202 (49.6%)	14 (35.0%)
5-10 years	83 (18.6%)	69 (17.0%)	14 (35.0%)
10-15 years	40 (8.9%)	35 (8.6%)	5 (12.5%)
15-20 years	22 (4.9%)	20 (4.9%)	2 (5.0%)
20+ years	24 (5.4%)	22 (5.4%)	2 (5.0%)

Note. Main Campus $N = 407$ (91.1%); Satellite Campus $N = 40$ (8.9%). Percentages are column percentages within each campus.

Bivariate Correlation and Descriptives Statistics

All scales demonstrated acceptable to excellent internal consistency ($\alpha = .72–.95$). One item was removed from the Work-Life Balance scale prior to analysis due to a low corrected item-total correlation (.33), producing a final 3-item scale ($\alpha = .80$). **Table 5** presents means, standard deviations, Cronbach's alphas, and bivariate correlations among all primary study variables. Need satisfaction and need frustration were strongly negatively correlated ($r = -.64$, $p < .01$), confirming their empirical distinctiveness as theorized (Van den Broeck et al., 2016). Among predictors, lack of career goals and burnout showed the strongest associations with turnover intention ($r = .68$ each), and no inter-predictor correlation exceeded $r = .82$, addressing multicollinearity concerns (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019). Demographic variables were entered as Step 1 controls in the hierarchical regression prior to testing the primary SDT constructs.

Table 5

Bivariate Correlations & Descriptive Statistics

Variable	*M*	*SD*	Cronbach's α	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Need Satisfaction	3.70	0.58		1						
2. Need Frustration	2.16	0.70		-.64**	1					
3. Burnout	2.71	0.85	.720	-.57**	.66**	1				
4. Ineffective Leadership	1.94	1.02	.946	-.36**	.81**	.33**	1			
5. Lack of Career Goals	2.26	0.95	.876	-.57**	.82**	.51**	.48**	1		
6. Work-Life Balance	2.21	0.95	.801	-.28**	.39**	.47**	.29**	.29**	1	
7. Turnover Intention	2.76	0.94	.842	-.60**	.60**	.68**	.51**	.68**	.52**	1

Note. $N = 447$. *M* = mean. *SD* = standard deviation. $^{**}p < .01$ (2-tailed). α values reflect internal consistency for each scale. Need Satisfaction and Need Frustration are composite scores averaged across six validated subscale items; subscale alphas ranged from .72–.88 (Chen et al., 2015). The Ineffective Leadership scale demonstrated exceptionally high internal consistency (α = .946), reflecting the semantic similarity of passive-avoidant items in the MLQ subscale (Avolio & Bass, 2004).

Hypothesis Testing

Campus Location Comparative Analysis (H1a-H1c)

To determine whether employee experiences differed based on their geographic location, independent samples t-tests were conducted to compare main and satellite campus staff across all primary constructs. These analyses revealed that none of the observed differences between campus locations reached statistical significance, meaning hypotheses H1a, H1b, and H1c were not supported.

Specifically, there were no meaningful differences between main and satellite campus staff regarding Need Satisfaction, Need Frustration, or Turnover Intention. Because the effect sizes were negligible (all $d \leq 0.07$) and *p*-values were well above the .05 threshold, these results suggest that turnover drivers operate systemically across the entire institution rather than being tied to a specific location. Consequently, the full sample ($N = 447$) was retained for the

subsequent H2 analyses. The descriptive statistics and t-test results for these comparisons are presented in **Table 6**.

Table 6
Descriptive Comparison of Construct Means by Campus Location

Construct	Campus	*N*	*M*	*SD*	*t*	*p*	*d*
Need Satisfaction	Main	427	3.89	0.61	-0.39	.695	-0.06
	Satellite	43	3.93	0.52			
Need Frustration	Main	427	2.41	0.63	0.41	.681	0.07
	Satellite	43	2.37	0.51			
Turnover Intention	Main	409	2.76	0.95	0.45	.655	0.07
	Satellite	40	2.69	0.84			

Note. t, p, and Cohen's d refer to the independent-samples t-tests comparing Main vs. Satellite campus.

Hierarchical Regression (H2a-H2b)

A three-step hierarchical regression was conducted to predict turnover intention and test hypothesis H2a and H2b. This analysis aimed to determine whether need frustration explains significant incremental variance beyond demographic controls and need satisfaction. The final model was significant, $F(7, 437) = 53.46$, $p < .001$, explaining 46.1% of the variance in turnover intention.

In Step 1, demographic variables accounted for a small but significant portion of the variance, $R^2 = .049$, $p < .001$. In Step 2, the addition of need satisfaction significantly improved the model, $\Delta R^2 = .351$, $p < .001$, with need satisfaction emerging as a strong negative predictor ($\beta = -.601$). In Step 3, the inclusion of need frustration explained a significant additional 6.1% of the variance, $\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$.

Notably, need satisfaction's standardized coefficient shifted from $\beta = -.601$ in Model 2 to $\beta = -.372$ in Model 3 when need frustration entered the equation. This change reflects the constructs' empirical distinctiveness, need frustration captures unique predictive variance in

turnover intention that partially overlaps with, but is not reducible to, need satisfaction. In the final model, both need satisfaction (β = -.372, $p < .001$) and need frustration (β = .339, $p < .001$) remained significant independent predictors, with higher need satisfaction associated with lower turnover intention and higher need frustration associated with higher turnover intention. These findings support H2a and H2b, confirming that need frustration explains significant incremental variance in turnover intention beyond need satisfaction and that both constructs operate as independent psychological pathways to departure. The full results of the hierarchical regression models are presented in **Table 7**.

Table 7
Hierarchical Regression Predicting Turnover Intention

Predictor	β Model 1	β Model 2	β Model 3	*t*	*p*
Step 1: Demographics					
Gender	-.060	-.004	-.011	-.308	.759
Age	-.122	-.111	-.080	-2.150	.032
Education	.150	.137	.126	3.477	<.001
Position	.072	.002	-.013	-.353	.724
Tenure	.127	.159	.138	3.678	<.001
Step 2: + Need Satisfaction					
Need Satisfaction	-	-.601	-.372	-7.703	<.001
Step 3: + Need Frustration					
Need Frustration	-	-	.339	7.025	<.001
R^2	.049	.400	.461		
ΔR^2	.049	.351	.061		

Note. β values are presented separately for each model step to show the change in standardized coefficients as predictors are added. t and p values reflect the final model. **$p < .001$.

Parallel Mediation (H2c)

Parallel Mediation was calculated using bootstrapping (5,000 resamples) to examine the indirect effects of four organizational stressors on turnover intention through need satisfaction and need frustration. Across all four models, both need satisfaction and need frustration exhibited statistically significant indirect effects, with 95% bootstrap confidence intervals

excluding zero.

Need frustration demonstrated substantially stronger indirect effects than need satisfaction across all predictors, with pairwise contrasts consistently negative (range = −.540 to −.222), indicating that the primary explanatory pathway operates through psychological need thwarting rather than need fulfillment. All models exhibited partial mediation, as direct effects remained statistically significant after inclusion of both mediators. The negative direct effect for ineffective leadership reflects a suppression pattern: its positive bivariate association with turnover intention reverses sign once psychological need processes are controlled, indicating that ineffective leadership's influence operates almost entirely through need thwarting. The complete breakdown of indirect effects, direct effects, and pairwise mediator contrasts for each organizational stressor is presented in **Table 8**.

Table 8

Comparison of Indirect and Direct Effects Across Organizational Stressors (N = 449)

Predictor (X)	Mediator (M)	Indirect Effect (b)	BootSE	95% Boot CI	Direct Effect (c′)
Burnout	Need Satisfaction	.127	.025	[.079, .176]	.276***
	Need Frustration	.349	.033	[.287, .415]	
	Contrast (NS - NF)	*-.222*	*.044*	*[-.306, -.137]*	
Ineffective Leadership	Need Satisfaction	.092	.018	[.062, .130]	-.258***
	Need Frustration	.632	.048	[.542, .728]	
	Contrast (NS - NF)	*-.540*	*.055*	*[-.647, -.435]*	
Lack of Career Goals	Need Satisfaction	.145	.024	[.099, .195]	.098*
	Need Frustration	.428	.048	[.339, .525]	
	Contrast (NS - NF)	*-.283*	*.056*	*[-.399, -.181]*	
Work-Life Balance	Need Satisfaction	.096	.018	[.062, .135]	.092**
	Need Frustration	.328	.033	[.264, .392]	
	Contrast (NS - NF)	*-.232*	*.037*	*[-.307, -.159]*	

Note. N = 449. b = unstandardized coefficient. CI = confidence interval. Bootstrapping based on 5,000 samples. For Lack of Career Goals, $p = .0485$. *** $p < .001$, ** $p < .01$, * $p < .05$.

Summary of Hypothesis Testing

No significant campus location differences emerged for any construct (H1a–H1c not

supported), indicating that psychological need experiences operate consistently across the institution rather than as satellite-specific phenomena. Need frustration explained significant incremental variance in turnover intention beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$; H2a–H2b supported). Parallel mediation analyses confirmed a dual-pathway model in which both need satisfaction and need frustration significantly mediated the relationship between organizational stressors and turnover intention; however, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models (H2c supported), indicating differential rather than equivalent mediation and underscoring that retention efforts must prioritize removing structural need frustrators over adding need-supportive conditions. A comprehensive overview of the analysis strategies, statistical outcomes, and final statuses for all tested hypotheses is provided in **Table 9**.

Table 9
Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Hypothesis	Analysis	Result	Status
Campus Differences			
H1a: Satellite staff will report lower need satisfaction	*t*-test	$p = .695$	**Not Supported**
H1b: Satellite staff will report higher need frustration	*t*-test	$p = .681$	**Not Supported**
H1c: Satellite staff will report higher turnover intent	*t*-test	$p = .655$	**Not Supported**
SDT & Turnover Prediction			
H2a: Psychological need frustration will be significantly positive related to turnover	Hierarchical Regression	$\beta = .339$, $p < .001$	**Supported**
H2b: Psychological need frustration will explain significant incremental variance in turnover intention	Hierarchical Regression	$\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$	**Supported**
H2c: Relationship between various org stressors and turnover will be mediated by need frustration	Parallel Mediation	Significant indirect effects via both mediators; need frustration significantly stronger than need satisfaction across all	**Supported**

	models (significant C1 contrasts)

Note. $N = 445–470$. H1 was tested using independent samples *t*-tests. H2a and H2b were tested using hierarchical multiple regression with turnover intention as the dependent variable, controlling for demographics (gender, age, education, position, and tenure). H2c was tested using PROCESS Model 4 (Hayes, 2022) with 5,000 bootstrap samples and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals. Negative β coefficients indicate an inverse relationship with turnover intention, whereas positive β coefficients indicate a positive relationship.

Discussion

The quantitative findings extend prior qualitative findings (Salon, 2026) by demonstrating that psychological need satisfaction and need frustration operate as institution-wide rather than campus-specific mechanisms driving administrative staff turnover intention. While qualitative findings identified "benign neglect" (Salon, 2026) as a satellite-specific experience, these results suggest it reflects a broader organizational condition in which turnover is driven by both reduced need satisfaction and elevated need frustration across campuses.

A dual-process model emerged in which organizational stressors (ineffective leadership, burnout, career stagnation, and work–life balance) influence turnover intention through parallel psychological pathways. However, mediation analyses indicated that indirect effects via need frustration were consistently stronger than those via need satisfaction across all models, supporting a pattern of differential mediation.

This discussion is organized into four sections. First, Interpreting the Null Campus Comparison Findings examines why satellite and main campus staff showed no significant differences, addressing statistical power, aggregated metrics, and the hidden satellite experience. Second, Theoretical Analysis interprets the dominant predictors within the dual-process framework, including the primary role of overall need fulfillment, the counterintuitive competence paradox (momentary task proficiency despite high turnover intent), and alignment with SDT organizational literature. Third, Implications translates findings into policy, practice,

and research recommendations. Finally, Integration and Future Directions triangulate quantitative results with prior qualitative findings while acknowledging quantitative design limitations relative to qualitative and program assessment approaches (Salon, 2026).

Interpreting the Null Campus Comparison Findings

Contextualizing Non-Significant Quantitative Results

While the quantitative results in Study 2 did not show statistically significant differences in need satisfaction or turnover intention between campus locations (H1a–H1c), these findings should be interpreted considering the exploratory sequential design. The most likely statistical explanation for the null campus comparison results is that the satellite subgroup was too small to reliably detect subtle effects; as the post-hoc power analysis showed, the satellite sample (N = 40) had near-zero power to detect small effects (d = .20, power < .001) but excellent power for medium and large effects (d = .50, power = .853 - .998). The absence of significant campus differences therefore provides reasonable evidence against medium and large location-based differences, but it cannot rule out smaller satellite-specific patterns below the study's detection threshold. Two supplementary factors further contextualize what the survey data can and cannot tell us about the satellite experience.

Statistical Power and Subgroup Granularity

Beyond statistical power limitations, unique satellite stressors may have been masked by aggregation within the larger institutional dataset. While non-significant p-values (p > .05) indicate that turnover intent intensity does not differ significantly between campuses, they do not imply that staff experiences are identical across locations. The census-based design, dominated by main campus respondents (N = 427 vs. satellite N = 43), likely smoothed over location-specific patterns that could emerge with balanced subgroup representation or location-sensitive

measures.

Contextual Clues vs. Aggregated Metrics

While the survey quantified the magnitude of need frustration, prior qualitative interviews captured the mechanisms (Salon, 2026). Standardized instruments like the BPNSFS reliably measured that staff felt relatedness deficits, but only qualitative data revealed why: the "physicality of isolation," prolonged "wait-times for main-campus responses," and "perceived invisibility to central administration." These ecological factors, lost in aggregated survey metrics, emerged as primary turnover drivers in the qualitative phase, demonstrating the complementary strengths of the exploratory sequential design.

The "Hidden" Satellite Experience

The divergence between qualitative and quantitative findings suggests satellite staff may normalize chronic frustrations, reporting similar scores to main-campus peers on standardized scales. Only semi-structured interviews revealed "organizational disrespect" and "satellite-specific resource deficits" as distinct experiences. This confirms that for peripheral campuses, qualitative methods serve as critical diagnostic tools, unlocking insights that quantitative metrics alone cannot trigger. Future research with balanced campus subgroups and location-sensitive measures would be better positioned to detect these subtle but structurally significant patterns.

Critically, this divergence between papers may itself represent a theoretical contribution: satellite campuses may function as early diagnostic sites where institution-wide pathologies first become visible, concentrating structural conditions, centralized control, resource asymmetry, geographic isolation, in ways that surface through qualitative inquiry before they are detectable in aggregated quantitative data. The null campus comparison findings therefore do not undermine the satellite campus focus of this dissertation; rather, they suggest that the satellite

context provided the analytic conditions necessary to identify mechanisms that operate, at lower intensity, across the entire institution. Future research with balanced campus subgroups and location-sensitive measures would be better positioned to detect these subtle but structurally significant patterns.

Theoretical Analysis

The hierarchical regression and parallel mediation analyses consistently identified need satisfaction and need frustration as the primary psychological mechanisms linking organizational conditions to turnover intention, with the dual-process model supported across all analytical approaches. Within this dual-process framework, the overall balance of need satisfaction and need frustration displayed robust associations with withdrawal intentions. The progressive attenuation of most demographic predictors across model steps further supports SDT's universality argument: the psychological conditions of need satisfaction and need frustration appear to drive turnover intention independently of individual characteristics such as gender, position level, or job tenure, suggesting that turnover is a structural and psychological phenomenon rather than a function of who employees are.

The Structural Context of Asymmetric Power

Across the full sample, psychological need satisfaction and need frustration emerged as significant predictors of turnover intention in hierarchical regression ($\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration, and $\beta = .339$ in the final model, respectively), with overall need satisfaction showing the strongest individual correlation among the primary study variables ($r = -.603$). This statistical pattern positions a deficit in total need fulfillment as the primary engine driving the dual-process framework, a reality that deeply reflects the core theme of individual agency central to SDT organizational literature. Although no statistically significant differences

in need states emerged between campus locations, these results must be interpreted within the institutional framework of asymmetric power dynamics: the absence of large campus-level differences does not preclude a systemic loss of agency across the full institution but rather suggests that centralized control functions as an institution-wide condition rather than a satellite-specific one.

For satellite staff, this frustration is structurally amplified by geographic and administrative distance from central decision-making. The statistical similarity between campuses reveals a universal desire for agency among administrative professionals; however, satellite contexts face disproportionate structural barriers to realizing it. Thus, while mean scores did not differ significantly, the data confirm power asymmetries operate through universal psychological mechanisms: when basic psychological needs are systematically thwarted, particularly within highly centralized satellite models, turnover intention elevates, reflecting the clear interplay between universal psychological needs and context-specific structural constraint.

Forced Generalism and the Competence Paradox

Lack of career goals emerged as the strongest organizational stressor correlated with turnover intention ($r = .68$, $p < .01$), yet the sample simultaneously reported a relatively stable baseline of overall need satisfaction ($M = 3.70$, $SD = 0.58$). This apparent paradox is resolved through prior qualitative findings on "forced generalism": staff manage expanding responsibilities without the role clarity or authority to develop specialized expertise (Salon, 2026). Employees frequently feel effective and task-competent in executing their immediate, routine day-to-day duties, but they lack meaningful long-term growth trajectories, precisely the structural deficit that the OCGS captures.

Global Needs vs. OCGS Distinction: While global need satisfaction measures an employee's momentary, functional stability within their current role framework, the OCGS specifically tracks long-term career development and vertical progression. Staff who maintain baseline operational execution but face permanently foreclosed advancement pathways represent the forced generalism population most likely to opt for voluntary exit. This quantitative-qualitative convergence underscores the critical necessity of distinguishing immediate task capability from long-term growth capacity in higher education turnover research. While formal convergent validity analysis between global need satisfaction and the OCGS was not conducted, the overarching statistical pattern aligns perfectly with prior qualitative findings (Salon, 2026). Future research testing their discriminant validity would strengthen this interpretation.

Benign Neglect as a Hidden Frustrator

Non-significant relatedness differences between campuses do not fully capture the "benign neglect" phenomenon identified by qualitative accounts (Salon, 2026). While the BPNSFS reliably measures proximal social connection, it is less sensitive to structural, institutional invisibility. Satellite staff experience their connection to the broader university architecture undermined by a peripheral status in centralized communications, decision-making, and resource allocation.

The statistically similar quantitative scores across sites suggest a normalization of marginalization; satellite employees adapt over time to a limited institutional presence, masking localized environmental disparities on standardized measures. Nevertheless, correlation analysis confirmed that global need satisfaction, which encompasses relational belonging, maintains a powerful negative association with turnover intention ($r = -.603$, $p < .01$), and the confirmatory factor analysis validated that need satisfaction and need frustration function as empirically

distinct constructs with clean factor loadings. This reveals benign neglect's subtle mechanism: even when overall psychometric scores appear equivalent across campus locations, institutional invisibility contributes meaningfully to burnout and turnover risk, highlighting systemic social embeddedness as a critical retention factor.

Implications

The dual-process finding, that need frustration and need satisfaction independently and differentially mediates the relationship between organizational stressors and turnover intention, carries direct implications for institutional policy, practice, and future research.

Policy Implications

Career Path Mapping Policy. Lack of Career Goals emerged as the strongest organizational stressor ($r = .68$), with mediation analyses confirming parallel effects through both need frustration and satisfaction. The university should transition from job-based HR to a mandatory Institutional Career Mapping Policy, requiring clearly defined advancement trajectories for all administrative roles. This directly addresses the forced generalism driving turnover.

Decentralized Operational Authority. Overall need satisfaction showed the strongest negative association with turnover intention ($r = -.603$), and need frustration explained significant incremental variance beyond satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). Policy must address structural autonomy thwarting by establishing formal protocols granting satellite campuses discretion over routine operational decisions, eliminating unnecessary main-campus approvals.

Practical Implications

Institution-Wide SDT Training. The consistent needs-turnover relationship across campuses confirms universal SDT mechanisms. All administrative leads should receive

mandatory autonomy-supportive supervision training to reduce active need frustration and foster psychological safety.

Career Development Infrastructure. Lack of career goals (r = .68) demands structured professional development programs and transparent internal promotion pathways for all administrative staff, directly addressing forced generalism.

Satellite Communication Protocols. Though differences were non-significant, "communication isolation" warrants formal cross-campus protocols ensuring satellite staff visibility in decision-making and resource allocation, preventing latent relatedness frustration.

Research Implications

Dual-Process Measurement Standard. Parallel mediation analyses indicate that need frustration and need satisfaction both significantly mediate the relationship between organizational stressors and turnover intention; however, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently stronger across all models, indicating differential rather than equivalent pathways. This suggests that satisfaction-only frameworks may underestimate retention risk by failing to capture the effects of active need thwarting.

Future SDT research should prioritize measures that distinguish between need satisfaction and need frustration, as the BPNSFS demonstrates incremental explanatory value beyond need satisfaction alone. Specifically, need frustration accounted for significant additional variance in turnover intention ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$), indicating that it captures unique predictive information not fully reflected in satisfaction-based measures.

Need Frustration Thresholds. Future studies should test whether need frustration reaches an irreversible threshold beyond which turnover becomes inevitable regardless of extrinsic incentives (compensation, benefits). This threshold may vary across contexts where constructs

such as asymmetric power dynamics and benign neglect, accelerate motivational decline toward amotivation.

Integration and Future Directions

Integration and Triangulation

This study successfully triangulated previous qualitative narratives with empirical confirmation across the full sample ($N = 447$). Previous qualitative research descriptions of resource neglect and centralized control maps directly onto quantitative findings where organizational stressors significantly predict both need frustration and need satisfaction as parallel psychological pathways to turnover intention (Salon, 2026). Although satellite group comparisons were statistically underpowered ($N = 40$), mediation analyses confirmed the dual-process model, where stressors transmit influence through both active need thwarting and reduced need support, operates consistently institution-wide.

Previous qualitative research identified autonomy constraints and lack of career development as the primary structural conditions driving need frustration among satellite campus staff (Salon, 2026). In the current study, these underlying institutional vulnerabilities were empirically validated by the strong quantitative associations observed between turnover intention and their leading predictors: global need satisfaction ($r = -.603$) and lack of career goals ($r = .68$), confirming their centrality across both phases of the sequential design. In the present study, these structural stressors operated through dual psychological pathways, overall need satisfaction and need frustration, with indirect effects via need frustration consistently stronger across all parallel mediation models, reflecting a pattern of differential rather than equivalent mediation.

Critically, the incremental variance finding that need frustration explains significant unique variance beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$) establishes that retention

interventions must address active thwarting rather than merely adding supportive conditions. This distinction carries direct implications for program evaluation criteria. Without qualitative contextual specificity and quantitative predictive modeling, the wellness assessment would lack the empirical foundation necessary to move beyond generic evaluation toward institution-specific retention diagnosis.

Limitations & Future Research

A primary limitation concerns the campus comparison analyses. While the total sample was robust ($N = 447$), the satellite subgroup ($N = 40$) lacked sufficient power to detect subtle geographic effects. Future research should employ multi-campus designs with balanced representation ($N \geq 30$ per campus) and longitudinal tracking over 12 months to determine whether need frustrations predict actual turnover behavior.

Cross-institutional replication at other multi-campus universities would test whether OU's institutional consistency represents a unique pattern or higher education norm. This would include location-sensitive measurement development with constructs like benign neglect and asymmetric power quantitatively, that would strengthen detection of campus-specific mechanisms within larger datasets.

Conclusion

This research demonstrates that administrative staff retention at a large, public research university hinges not on geography, but on psychological processes. While both need satisfaction and need frustration significantly mediate the relationship between organizational stressors and turnover intention, indirect effects via need frustration were consistently strong across all models, indicating a pattern of differential rather than equivalent influence. This reframes retention beyond a satellite versus main campus distinction toward institution-wide

psychological mechanisms.

Institutional leadership must therefore adopt a dual imperative: enhancing need-supportive conditions while actively addressing structural factors that thwart autonomy, competence, and relatedness. The evidence indicates that preventing need frustration represents a particularly critical component of retention, as it constitutes the dominant psychological pathway associated with departure.

These findings advance SDT organizational research by demonstrating that need frustration and satisfaction operate as empirically distinct, independently significant mechanisms driving administrative turnover, consistently across campus contexts, suggesting structural features of higher education administration rather than location-specific phenomena.

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Theory-Informed Assessment of Wellness Program Alignment with Administrative Staff Psychological Needs in Higher Education

Abstract

This theory-informed assessment uses Self-Determination Theory (SDT) as an evaluative framework to examine whether an institutional well-being program addresses the psychological conditions driving administrative staff turnover. Building on institutional research establishing need frustration, particularly autonomy deprivation and lack of career development, as the dominant predictors of turnover intention among administrative staff at this university, this study assesses the extent to which the institution's wellness program engages the organizational conditions most responsible for administrative staff departure. Program documents, public-facing web pages, and administrator interviews were systematically coded using the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS). The program received a TCS score of 2 out of 19 indicators, reflecting minimal explicit theoretical grounding. Two positive indicators, choice architecture that implicitly supports autonomy and social features that implicitly support relatedness, were present by design philosophy rather than explicit SDT application. A practitioner-led design approach and a centralized oneness mandate producing uniform delivery across all campus locations together explain why the program's functional maturity has not translated into theoretical alignment with the psychological conditions driving turnover. The program functions as a thermometer rather than a treatment, monitoring individual well-being without engaging the structural conditions that produce need frustration. These findings demonstrate the value of TCS-SDT evaluation as a diagnostic tool for higher education program assessment, one capable of moving beyond participation metrics toward analysis of whether interventions are designed to address the

conditions they are meant to change.

Introduction

Administrative staff turnover represents a persistent and costly performance challenge across higher education institutions. Research documents that turnover among non-faculty staff erodes institutional capacity, disrupts student-facing services, and generates replacement costs that compound over time, particularly in multi-campus systems where administrative continuity is essential to operational coherence (Mor Barak et al., 2001; Tett & Meyer, 1993). Previous research at this institution found that departure decisions among administrative staff were driven not by geography or individual disengagement, but by the systematic frustration of basic psychological needs, specifically the erosion of autonomy, competence, and relatedness conditions across both satellite and main campus contexts (Salon, 2026). Structural conditions including asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and organizational invisibility were identified as the primary mechanisms generating that frustration, with need frustration and need satisfaction emerging as significant and empirically distinct predictors of turnover intention, operating through parallel pathways across the institution's administrative workforce.

Institutions have increasingly responded to staff turnover by implementing well-being programs designed to support employee engagement, reduce burnout, and improve retention. These programs typically span physical health, mental wellness, social connection, professional development, and financial well-being, and are frequently administered through centralized human resources functions with the explicit goal of strengthening the employment relationship (McCallum & Price, 2017; Song & Baicker, 2019). Yet evidence on their effectiveness as retention mechanisms is mixed. While well-being programs can generate meaningful individual-level benefits, including reduced stress and stronger perceptions of institutional care, research

consistently finds that programs not theoretically grounded in the psychological mechanisms driving turnover produce weaker and less durable results (Croft et al., 2024; Prestwich et al., 2014). At this institution, the primary retention-adjacent initiative is a university-wide wellness platform administered through central Human Resources and available to all employees across the multiple campuses. The program supports participation across eight dimensions of wellness through a points-based reward system and is positioned institutionally as a mechanism for supporting employee engagement and well-being, and by extension, retention.

Whether wellness programs are designed in ways that actually align with the organizational and psychological factors driving turnover is a consequential but underexamined question. Institutions increasingly implement well-being initiatives as retention strategies, yet the theoretical underpinnings of these programs are rarely examined systematically (Croft et al., 2024; Michie & Prestwich, 2010). Theory is often underutilized or applied post hoc in program evaluation, limiting assessments to surface-level descriptions of participation and engagement rather than diagnostic analyses of whether a program addresses the mechanisms driving the behavior it is meant to change (Nieminen et al., 2022). This design gap is especially consequential when, as is the case here, the conditions driving turnover are specific and structural: constrained autonomy, foreclosed career development, and organizational invisibility are not addressed by programs organized around general wellness or individual resilience. A program that supports stress management without engaging the organizational conditions that generate that stress risks monitoring symptoms rather than addressing causes.

This paper addresses that gap directly by asking: To what extent does the institutional wellness program address the specific organizational factors and psychological needs that influence administrative staff turnover at satellite campuses? Using the Theory Coding Scheme

(Michie & Prestwich, 2010) with Self-Determination Theory as the evaluative framework, this study assesses whether the institution's existing wellness program is designed to engage the psychological conditions empirically identified as the primary drivers of administrative staff departure. By applying theory-informed evaluation to a functioning institutional program, this paper demonstrates the feasibility of this approach as a scholarly and practical tool in higher education administration and contributes a replicable model for institutions seeking to evaluate whether their retention-adjacent initiatives are designed to address the conditions actually driving departure.

Literature Review

Well-being interventions in organizational settings are structured programs designed to promote employee health, engagement, and psychological functioning across physical, social, emotional, and professional dimensions. These programs typically operate through voluntary participation structures, offering employees resources, incentives, or activities intended to support individual flourishing and, by extension, reduce absenteeism, disengagement, and turnover (McCallum & Price, 2017). The intended mechanism connecting well-being programs to retention is generally motivational: by improving how employees feel about their work and their institution, programs are expected to reduce exit intent and strengthen organizational commitment. In practice, these programs vary considerably in design logic, ranging from narrow health-behavior interventions focused on physical activity and nutrition to comprehensive platforms that span professional development, financial wellness, and social connection. Technology-based delivery has grown increasingly prominent, with digital wellness platforms and gamified engagement systems adopted to increase participation by allowing employees to engage flexibly across locations and schedules (Amirabdolahian et al., 2025; Galante et al.,

2018). Despite their diversity, most well-being programs share a common design assumption: that supporting individuals in managing their health and development will produce the organizational conditions necessary for sustained engagement. Whether that assumption holds when organizational conditions themselves are the primary driver of disengagement is the central question this paper investigates.

Well-Being Interventions in Higher Education

Within higher education, well-being programs have expanded significantly in response to growing institutional concern about staff burnout, turnover, and declining engagement. Universities have deployed a wide range of initiatives, including physical and mental health resources, employee assistance programs, recognition systems, professional development offerings, peer mentorship, and academic coaching, with the explicit goal of strengthening the employment relationship and supporting retention (McCallum & Price, 2017). Recent research documents the prevalence of burnout and psychological distress among university staff across role types, making well-being programming a visible institutional priority in higher education settings (Rahman et al., 2024). Evidence on effectiveness is mixed, however. Song and Baicker (2019) found through a large-scale randomized evaluation that while workplace wellness programs can positively influence employee perceptions of institutional commitment to health and safety, direct effects on productivity and retention are more limited and inconsistent. Other research suggests that programs generating high participation rates and positive satisfaction scores do not necessarily produce the organizational outcomes, reduced turnover intent, stronger engagement, improved psychological safety, that they are designed to address (Croft et al., 2024).

A persistent pattern in the effectiveness literature is that programs designed around

general wellness and individual health behavior produce weaker results when the conditions driving disengagement are structural rather than individual. For administrative staff in higher education, whose departure decisions are shaped by asymmetric power dynamics, constrained career development, and organizational invisibility rather than personal health deficits, this pattern is particularly consequential. Programs not designed to address the organizational conditions driving turnover are unlikely to function as effective retention mechanisms, regardless of their functional breadth or engagement metrics.

The dominant design logic of these programs, voluntary individual participation in health and development activities, carries a structural limitation that the higher education effectiveness literature has begun to surface. Flexible scheduling and telecommuting arrangements represent a partial exception, as these directly modify the conditions under which employees work rather than offering supplemental support alongside unchanged work conditions (Franco et al., 2021). But these structural interventions remain the exception. The broader pattern is one of person-centered design applied to what the organizational conditions driving turnover suggest is a system-centered problem. Well-being programs in higher education are typically administered through central human resources functions and positioned as retention-adjacent initiatives, yet their design philosophies have rarely been evaluated against the specific psychological mechanisms they would need to engage in order to function as retention tools. This is the design-alignment gap that the present assessment is positioned to investigate.

Use of Theory in Well-Being Interventions

Theory is increasingly recognized as a critical but underutilized element of well-being intervention design and evaluation. Davidoff et al. (2015) argued that improvement initiatives in organizational and health settings are most coherent and evaluable when they make their

underlying theory of change explicit, identifying the specific mechanisms through which an intervention is expected to produce its intended outcomes. When theory is absent or implicit, evaluations default to measuring participation and satisfaction rather than examining whether an intervention is designed to engage the mechanisms that actually drive the behavior it is meant to change. Michie and Prestwich (2010) operationalized this argument through the Theory Coding Scheme, demonstrating that health behavior interventions vary substantially in the degree to which they incorporate theoretical constructs and that this variation predicts intervention effectiveness. Their review found that most evaluated interventions applied theory superficially or post hoc, referencing theoretical frameworks as descriptive labels rather than as design specifications that determine which components are included, how they are sequenced, and what outcomes they are expected to produce.

Prestwich et al.'s (2014) meta-analysis extended this finding, demonstrating that interventions explicitly grounded in robust theoretical frameworks achieve stronger and more consistent outcomes across organizational contexts than those applying theory incidentally. The implication for well-being program evaluation is direct: a program that does not specify the theoretical constructs guiding its design cannot be meaningfully assessed for whether it is engaging the right mechanisms, nor can it be refined in theoretically coherent ways when outcomes fall short. Nieminen et al. (2022) identified this as a pervasive gap in organizational well-being research, noting that program evaluations frequently stop at participant satisfaction and engagement metrics without examining the causal architecture connecting program activities to intended organizational outcomes. In higher education specifically, Raasch (2017) demonstrated that SDT constructs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, can serve as actionable diagnostic criteria in program evaluation, identifying specific gaps between what a

program is designed to do and what the psychological needs of participants actually require. Rothes et al. (2022) extended this approach, showing that explicitly theory-grounded assessments generate more precise and actionable recommendations than general satisfaction evaluations. Together, this body of work establishes the theoretical and methodological foundation for the present assessment. Theory-informed evaluation of institutional wellness programs, using the Theory Coding Scheme calibrated to Self-Determination Theory, provides the most diagnostically rigorous means of determining whether a program is designed to engage the conditions that actually drive the retention outcomes it is positioned to address.

Theoretical Framework

Self-Determination Theory provides the evaluative standard against which this assessment is conducted. SDT has become an increasingly influential framework for understanding motivation and well-being in higher education workplaces, where growing concerns about turnover and disengagement have prompted renewed attention to the psychological conditions that sustain or erode employee commitment (McAnally & Hagger, 2024; Rigby & Ryan, 2018). SDT identifies the fulfillment of three universal psychological needs, autonomy, competence, and relatedness, as essential for sustained intrinsic motivation, well-being, and voluntary organizational commitment (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). Critically, SDT distinguishes between the satisfaction of these needs, which produces engagement and growth, and their active frustration, which produces ill-being, disengagement, and exit behavior. This distinction is consequential for retention research: organizational environments that frustrate psychological needs do not merely fail to motivate, they actively generate the conditions that drive employees toward departure. SDT's consistent empirical finding, that job satisfaction and retention depend on the fulfillment of autonomy,

competence, and relatedness, and are undermined by their active frustration, provides the theoretical standard against which this paper evaluates the institution's wellness program (Busque-Carrier et al., 2021; Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). A program designed to support retention should, by this standard, engage the conditions that satisfy or frustrate these needs. Whether the wellness program does so is what the Theory Coding Scheme assessment that follows is designed to determine.

This theoretical positioning is supported empirically. Rigby and Ryan (2018) describe a broader shift in how employees across organizational levels experience work motivation, away from purely extrinsic drivers like compensation and toward work that is fulfilling, autonomous, and aligned with personal values. For administrative staff in higher education, this shift carries particular institutional weight. Research at this institution found that departure decisions among administrative staff were experienced not as economically driven choices but as restorative acts, exits from organizational conditions that had become psychologically untenable (Salon, 2026). SDT's sub-theory of Basic Psychological Needs (BPNT) specifies that need frustration, the active thwarting of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, produces qualitatively different and more severe motivational consequences than the mere absence of need satisfaction (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013). For retention purposes, this means that a wellness program operating at the level of need support, offering activities that supplement positive working conditions, will not address the motivational damage produced by need frustration at the organizational level. The distinction between a program that supports well-being and one that addresses the structural sources of ill-being is the evaluative lens this assessment applies to the wellness program.

Methods

Theory Coding Scheme

The Theory Coding Scheme (TCS), developed by Michie and Prestwich (2010), is a validated 19-item instrument for assessing the degree to which an intervention explicitly incorporates theoretical constructs into its design and delivery. The TCS employs binary coding, with each item scored as present or absent, producing a summary score reflecting the number of indicators present out of 19. In this assessment, three descriptive labels, no theory present, general well-being framework present, and specific SDT constructs present, were used as interpretive anchors to guide coding judgment and document the evidentiary basis for each binary decision, rather than as a modified scale. All final item scores were recorded as present or absent consistent with the original TCS scoring protocol. The TCS was selected for this assessment because it provides a systematic, replicable coding framework that moves evaluation beyond impressionistic judgment toward transparent, criterion-referenced analysis. Its three domains, Theory Specification (Items 1–3), Theory Implementation (Items 4–12), and Theory Evaluation (Items 13–19), map directly onto the evaluative questions this paper addresses: whether the program names and specifies SDT as its theoretical basis, whether its components are explicitly linked to SDT constructs, and whether it measures and evaluates outcomes in theoretical terms.

It should be noted that the standard TCS assesses the presence of any named behavior change theory rather than evaluating against a specific predetermined framework. In this assessment, SDT was designated as the evaluative standard against which all 19 items were coded, consistent with the study's sequential design logic in which prior empirical research at this institution established SDT constructs as the psychological mechanisms most relevant to administrative staff turnover (Salon, 2026). This adaptation follows precedent established by

Horan et al. (2021), who applied the TCS against domain-specific theoretical standards in occupational health contexts, and by Raasch (2017) and Rothes et al. (2022), who demonstrated the utility of SDT as an evaluative framework in higher education program assessment. Programs demonstrating alignment with other behavior change frameworks, such as the Transtheoretical Model or Goal Setting Theory identified in administrator interviews, were noted in the qualitative context but did not satisfy TCS items against the SDT evaluative standard applied here.

For this assessment, SDT served as the theoretical framework against which all 19 TCS items were applied. Each program component identified through document analysis and administrator interviews was coded according to whether it demonstrated no theoretical grounding, implicit alignment with general well-being principles, or explicit grounding in SDT's autonomy, competence, and relatedness constructs. The TCS codebook used for this assessment is provided in Appendix C.

The Case: Wellness program at a large public research university

The case under assessment is an institution-wide employee wellness platform administered through the Office of Human Resources and available to all benefits-eligible employees across multiple campuses. The program is positioned by the institution as a mechanism for supporting employee well-being, engagement, and by extension, retention. In December 2025, the university transitioned its wellness platform to an external wellness software vendor, a change that updated the program's technology infrastructure and activity catalog while preserving its foundational design logic: a points-based incentive system through which employees earn rewards by completing activities across eight wellness dimensions.

Those eight dimensions, physical, emotional, financial, social, occupational, intellectual,

spiritual, and environmental, are drawn from the SAMHSA whole-person wellness taxonomy rather than from a behavioral or motivational theory of change. Employees accumulate points by logging qualifying activities within each dimension, with point thresholds tied to reward tiers including premium contribution discounts on university health insurance. The "Your Plan, Your Way" participation structure allows employees to self-select activities from a catalog of more than 400 options, providing flexibility in how engagement requirements are met but not in the underlying point-and-reward architecture that governs participation. The program includes team-based challenge features designed to encourage social engagement across worksites, and an Employee Assistance Program (EAP) component providing confidential counseling and support referrals.

The program is administered by a small team within Human Resources, comprising two administrators and their supervising manager, the entirety of the program's implementation staff, responsible for day-to-day implementation, participant communication, and vendor coordination. Program administrators hold responsibility for delivery rather than original design. The institutional decision to adopt a points-based, multi-dimensional wellness platform predates the current administrative team, a distinction that is methodologically relevant because administrator interview data reflects the program as currently enacted rather than the design rationale of its originators. The wellness program is the primary retention-adjacent initiative available to administrative staff institution-wide and the sole programmatic mechanism through which the university formally addresses employee well-being as an organizational priority.

Theory Informed Program Assessment

This study employs a single case study design to conduct a theory-informed assessment of the university's employee wellness program. A case study approach is appropriate here

because it enables in-depth examination of a bounded, context-specific phenomenon, the design and implementation of a single institutional program, within the organizational and theoretical conditions that give it meaning (Merriam, 2009; Yin, 2018). The unit of analysis is the wellness program itself, bounded by its current implementation at this institution and evaluated against SDT's three basic psychological needs as the criteria for assessing whether the program is designed to engage the conditions most relevant to administrative staff retention. Single case designs of this kind are particularly well-suited to theory-informed assessments because they allow the evaluator to examine the relationship between a program's design logic and a specific theoretical framework in depth, producing diagnostic conclusions that multi-program comparative designs, which prioritize breadth over specificity, are unlikely to generate.

The assessment draws on two complementary data sources: systematic analysis of program documents and semi-structured interviews with program administrators. Document analysis provided the primary basis for TCS coding, establishing what the program is formally designed to do and how its components are described and justified to participants. Administrator interviews complemented the documentary record by capturing implementation realities, the design philosophy, contextual constraints, and institutional priorities that shape how the program operates in practice, that official materials do not always reflect (Damschroder et al., 2009). Together, these two sources allowed for comparison between the program's intended design and its enacted implementation, a distinction that is theoretically significant when evaluating whether a program's formal components align with the psychological mechanisms that sustain motivation and reduce voluntary exit.

Data Collection

Documentary Sources

The primary documentary sources for this assessment included the wellness program handbook (2020–present), program website content including activity descriptions and the points-based reward system, promotional materials distributed to staff, participation guidelines and requirements, and available quarterly and annual program reports. These materials represented the program's official design logic and constituted the primary basis for TCS coding, as they communicate the program's structure, goals, and theoretical underpinnings, or their absence, to participants and institutional stakeholders alike. Additional documentary sources included the program's public-facing web pages: the About [Institutional Wellness Initiative] page, the [Institutional Wellness Initiative] Portal page, the [Institutional Wellness Initiative] Programs page, the Employee Assistance Program page, the At Your Campus page, and the Wellness Benefit Resources page (Human Resources, 2025, 2026).

Administrator Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with two program administrators and their supervising manager, all of whom hold responsibility for the program's ongoing implementation and management rather than its original design. This distinction is methodologically relevant: administrator perspectives reflect the enacted program as currently delivered rather than the design rationale of the program's originators, which means interview data provided insight into implementation context and institutional constraints rather than design intent. The interview protocol was developed based on the TCS coding categories to systematically probe how each dimension of the program is understood and implemented by those responsible for its delivery (Damschroder et al., 2009). Interviews were conducted via Zoom and lasted approximately 20–25 minutes. Transcripts were generated through Zoom's automated transcription feature and reviewed for accuracy prior to analysis.

Qualitative data from both documentary sources and administrator interviews were coded deductively according to TCS categories and SDT constructs, a triangulation strategy allowing for systematic comparison between the program's formal design as documented in official materials and its implementation as described by administrators. Where documentary and interview data converged, findings were treated as robust. Where they diverged, the divergence itself was treated as analytically significant, reflecting the gap between program design intent and implementation reality.

Data Analysis

TCS coding was applied to all documentary sources using the 19-item scheme as the primary analytical framework, with ratings assigned according to whether evidence of explicit theoretical grounding, implicit alignment, or no theoretical grounding was present. The framework applied six analytical sub-clusters: Reference to Underpinning Theory, Targeting of Relevant Theoretical Constructs, Using Theory to Select or Tailor Interventions, Measurement of Constructs, Testing of Mediation Effects, and Refining Theory. These sub-clusters map onto the scheme’s three primary domains: Theory Specification, Theory Implementation, and Theory Evaluation.The full TCS codebook, including item definitions and coding criteria specific to this assessment, is detailed in Appendix C.

Administrator interview transcripts were coded using these same categories to corroborate or complicate the documentary findings. Rather than conducting unstructured conversations, the interview script targeted the design intent behind individual TCS manual items, systematically mapping prompts to the three core overarching domains of Theory Specification, Theory Implementation, and Theory Evaluation. The full structural alignment showing how each specific interview prompt pairs with its corresponding TCS indicator is

provided in the interview protocol in Appendix C.

Due to the compact size of the program administrative team ($N = 2$) and the researcher's local professional position, specific procedural safeguards were built into the study to control for researcher and social desirability bias. First, the quantitative artifact scoring was finalized *before* conducting the administrative interviews to ensure an independent analytical sequence. Next, researcher bias was further mitigated through continuous reflexivity journaling and post-interview member-checking to verify that the qualitative data accurately captured the administrators' intentions rather than theoretical interpretations.

True mixed-methods triangulation was achieved by cross-validating the quantitative TCS script scores against these qualitative administrator narratives. The overarching themes represent the direct intersection where the physical program architecture matches the lived operational realities described by the coordinators.

Ethical Consideration

This study received Institutional Review Board approval through the IRB protocol process prior to data collection, under a modification to the existing dissertation study protocol. The modification acknowledged the inclusion of semi-structured interviews with program administrators as a data source and confirmed that the study qualified for expedited review given the minimal risk nature of the research activities. No identifiable personal data from employees or program participants was accessed or analyzed at any stage of the assessment. Administrator interviews were conducted with the informed consent of participants, who were made aware of the study's purpose, their voluntary participation, and the academic use of interview data. All institutional materials were reviewed solely for the purpose of this assessment and handled with discretion appropriate to their internal nature.

Confidentiality

All program materials and interview data were handled in accordance with the IRB-approved protocol described above, with discretion appropriate to their internal nature and solely for the purposes of this academic assessment.

Trustworthiness and Reflexivity

To manage the interpretive risks introduced by my institutional affiliation, this assessment utilized structured trustworthiness practices and continuous reflexive tracking. First, while applying a pre-specified deductive framework can risk distorting participant perspectives, the interview protocol used neutral, operational language instead of explicit psychological wording. By asking administrators to describe platform features in everyday workplace terms, the program's authentic design logic was allowed to emerge naturally without the researcher imposing an artificial theoretical narrative.

Second, an explicit audit trail was established by detailing the full TCS codebook, scoring criteria, and qualitative protocol mapping in Appendix C, allowing readers to scrutinize the analytical sequence independently. Third, researcher bias was actively monitored through reflexivity journaling and post-interview member-checking to ensure the transcripts captured the administrators' true operational intent rather than the researcher's preconceptions. Finally, where documentary criteria and interview data diverged, both accounts were preserved and reported rather than forced into compliance, ensuring that any analytical discrepancies were captured as valuable diagnostic insights.

Limitations

Several limitations bear on the interpretation of this assessment's findings. First, the single institutional case study design limits generalizability. The program design philosophy,

institutional governance structure, and satellite-main campus dynamics examined here are specific to this R1 university and may not transfer directly to community college systems, private institutions, or multi-campus networks with different administrative architectures. Second, document analysis relied on materials produced by the institution for internal and participant-facing purposes, which may not fully capture informal implementation practices, unwritten design rationale, or the lived participant experience of engaging with the program. Third, administrator interviews reflect the perspectives of individuals responsible for program implementation and management rather than original program design, meaning their accounts describe the program as currently enacted rather than as originally conceived, a distinction that limits the assessment's ability to speak to design intent versus implementation drift. Fourth, the platform transition occurred in December 2025, immediately prior to data collection. While the study's conceptual focus, methods, and interview protocols were retained across the transition, some documentary materials reflect the prior platform's design logic, which may introduce minor inconsistencies in the evidentiary record. Fifth, the TCS is a binary-adjacent coding instrument that assigns presence or absence ratings to theoretical grounding across 19 items. This structure is well-suited to identifying whether theoretical constructs are explicitly present in program design, but it is less sensitive to degrees of alignment, a program with strong implicit SDT alignment but no explicit theoretical language will score similarly to a program with no motivational grounding at all. This limitation is acknowledged in the interpretation of the TCS score in the Results section.

Results

The primary purpose of this assessment was to evaluate whether the university’s institutional well-being program possesses the structural framework required to mitigate

systemic employee turnover. To achieve this, the program was evaluated using the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS), an objective measuring tool that assesses an intervention across 19 specific items to determine its explicit, implicit, or absent alignment with behavior-change theory. A higher TCS score indicates an explicit, intentionally hardcoded use of behavioral mechanics, while a low score reveals that the program relies on an alternative framework. To provide a complete, mixed-methods evaluation, these objective quantitative scores are directly integrated with the qualitative administrator interview data throughout the findings below. While the quantitative scores capture the literal presence or absence of theoretical indicators within the program artifacts, the qualitative interview narratives serve to either corroborate or complicate those metrics by revealing the actual design intent, operational choices, and perceived barriers described by the program coordinators.

The results of the Theory Coding Scheme assessment are presented in three sections. First, the TCS Scoring Summary reports the overall indicator score for the wellness program across the 19 TCS items and situates that score within the broader TCS literature. Second, the TCS Domain Analysis systematically examines the program's theoretical grounding across the three coding domains, Theory Specification, Theory Implementation, and Theory Evaluation, presenting the specific documentary and interview evidence that produced each domain rating. Third, Qualitative Context provides the administrator perspectives that contextualize the scoring pattern, specifically the practitioner-led design philosophy and the institutional mandate for programmatic uniformity across campuses.

TCS Scoring Summary

Overall TCS Score

The wellness program received a TCS score of 2 out of 19 indicators present (10.5%), as seen in **Table 10**. This falls substantially below both the occupational health intervention average of 5.8 and the 10–14 range associated with theory-grounded program designs (Horan et al., 2021), placing the wellness program below the threshold of meaningful theoretical grounding. The two positive indicators were Item 6, theory used to tailor intervention techniques to recipients, and Item 11, at least one theory-relevant construct explicitly linked to at least one intervention technique. Both positive indicators reflected the program's choice architecture: the "Your Plan, Your Way" structure allowing participants to select from more than 400 activities across eight wellness dimensions provided evidence of tailoring that implicitly aligns with SDT's autonomy construct, and the team challenge features provided evidence of at least one technique, social engagement, implicitly linked to the relatedness construct. These alignments were implicit rather than explicit: neither the program documentation nor administrator communications named SDT or its constructs as the basis for these design decision. However, this implicit alignment was directly corroborated by the qualitative interview data. When asked how the platform structurally addresses basic human needs (Appendix C), ADM01 confirmed that features like the "Your Plan, Your Way" tracking catalog were intentionally built to maximize user choice, noting, "they choose what goals they want... it's up to them." Furthermore, the team challenge modules were explicitly engineered to foster collective connection, with ADM02 stating that the design logic was to ensure employees felt "part of a community" and "connected to other people across the campus." These narratives validate that the underlying psychological mechanisms of autonomy and relatedness were actively being operationalized on the ground, despite the complete absence of formal theoretical terminology.

Table 10
Theory Coding Scheme Item Scores for Program Assessment

Item	Domain	TCS Indicator	Score	Evidence Basis
1	Theory Specification	Theory named	0	No behavior change theory named in any document
2	Theory Specification	Theoretical constructs identified	0	SAMHSA taxonomy used, not SDT constructs
3	Theory Specification	Single coherent theory basis	0	No unifying theory specified
4	Theory Implementation	Theory used to select recipients	0	Participation-driven selection
5	Theory Implementation	Theory used to select techniques	0	Experience-based, not SDT-grounded
6	Theory Implementation	Theory used to tailor techniques	1	"Your Plan, Your Way" implicitly supports autonomy
7	Theory Implementation	Techniques linked to constructs	0	No explicit SDT linkage
8	Theory Implementation	All constructs addressed	0	Competence not addressed structurally
9	Theory Implementation	How change occurs specified	0	Mechanism not theorized
10	Theory Implementation	Moderators/mediators addressed	0	Not present
11	Theory Implementation	At least one technique linked to construct	1	Team challenges implicitly support relatedness
12	Theory Implementation	Fidelity measure used	0	Participation metrics only
13	Theory Evaluation	Theory-relevant constructs measured	0	No SDT instruments used
14	Theory Evaluation	Mediators measured	0	Not assessed
15	Theory Evaluation	Moderators measured	0	Not assessed
16	Theory Evaluation	Mediation tested	0	Not tested
17	Theory Evaluation	Moderation tested	0	Not tested
18	Theory Evaluation	Results discussed in theoretical terms	0	Participation framing only
19	Theory Evaluation	Theory refined based on findings	0	No theoretical refinement
Total			**2/19**	

Note. Scoring based on Michie and Prestwich (2010) TCS criteria applied against SDT as the evaluative framework. Score of 1 indicates indicator present; 0 indicates indicator not present. Items 6 and 11 reflect implicit rather than explicit SDT alignment.

TCS Domain Analysis

Theory Specification (Items 1-3)

Items 1 through 3 assess whether the program names a specific behavior change theory, identifies the theoretical constructs it targets, and is based on a single coherent theory. No indicators were met within this domain. The program's About page describes its organizing framework as the eight dimensions of wellness, Physical, Financial, Spiritual, Emotional, Social, Intellectual, Occupational, and Environmental, without reference to a named behavior change theory (Human Resources, 2025). The SAMHSA 8 Dimensions framework was developed as a content taxonomy for populations navigating mental health and substance use challenges, a categorization tool rather than a theory specifying the psychological mechanisms through which wellness activities produce motivational or retention outcomes. This philosophy is reflected in the program team's professional backgrounds: the Employee Health and Wellness Manager holds a degree in Exercise and Fitness Management, and the Employee Wellness Specialist holds a degree in Health and Exercise Science, backgrounds that ADM01 confirmed inform a practitioner experience-driven rather than theory-driven approach to program design (Human Resources, 2025). When asked directly whether a specific behavior change theory guided program design decisions, ADM01 described an approach grounded in professional experience rather than academic frameworks: "I don't hold to like a very specific theory, textbook sort of thing... my background, my degree, is exercise, fitness management. So I have like I went through kinesiology and health and wellness and that realm" (ADM01).

ADM02's account introduces an important qualification. He named four behavior change frameworks he applies to program and challenge design, the Transtheoretical Model of Change, the Health Belief Model, Goal Setting Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, and described their application to specific program components in detail. This represents genuine theoretical grounding at the individual practitioner level. However, two features of his account explain why this grounding does not satisfy the Theory Specification items. First, none of the four frameworks he named are SDT. The TCS is applied here against SDT as the evaluative standard, and none of ADM02's frameworks address autonomy, competence, or relatedness as SDT defines them, they are health behavior change theories applied to individual wellness outcomes rather than organizational need conditions. Second, and more consequential for the TCS score, ADM02 confirmed that his theoretical grounding has not been institutionalized in the program's formal documentation. When asked whether the theoretical basis for challenges is formally recorded, he described an attempt that did not sustain: "I tried... I created the document, I presented the document but it never really took off. We didn't fill out the document with every challenge... in corporate, obviously I would have to present like the ROI and everything. Here we don't have to, so it kind of just fell off" (ADM02). The theories exist in one administrator's practice but are not embedded in the program's formal design logic, promotional materials, or public-facing documentation, which is the evidentiary basis on which TCS Items 1 through 3 are coded.

The gap between ADM02's individual theoretical knowledge and the program's institutional documentation is the precise mechanism through which Theory Specification scores zero despite genuine theoretical awareness within the team. A program's theoretical grounding, for TCS purposes, must be present in its design documentation, not merely in the knowledge of

its practitioners. The SAMHSA framework categorizes wellness content across eight dimensions without specifying the psychological mechanisms through which those activities are expected to produce motivation, engagement, or retention outcomes, a content taxonomy rather than a theory of behavior change. No behavior change theory is named in any documentary source reviewed for this assessment, and no administrator communication to participants references SDT or its constructs in any form.

Theory Implementation (Items 4-12)

Items 4 through 12 assess whether theory was used to select recipients, select and tailor intervention techniques, link techniques to theoretical constructs, and address all theory-relevant constructs through at least one program component. Two indicators were met within this domain, Items 6 and 11, as described in the scoring summary above. The remaining seven indicators were not met against the SDT evaluative standard.

Program activities were not selected based on SDT principles. When asked how decisions about adding or removing activities were made, ADM01 described a participation-driven rather than theory-driven process: "Looking at participation in different events and activities... getting an idea for that just off purely off participation... asking for feedback as well" (ADM01). The program's choice architecture, allowing participants to select freely from more than 400 activities, theoretically represents a structural feature designed for autonomy support. However, administrators described this expansive menu in terms of inclusivity and accessibility rather than volitional autonomy: "We want to meet people where they're at... taking care of your health and well-being is for everyone" (ADM01). From an SDT perspective, this reveals a critical structural misalignment. While the platform provides superficial choice regarding individual wellness behaviors, it fails to address or satisfy the deep, work-related autonomy frustrations, such as rigid

top-down mandates and frozen operational agency, experienced by desk-level personnel. Ultimately, any overlap with SDT constructs is purely coincidental, reflecting a design philosophy of broad accessibility rather than a deliberate application of basic psychological need theory.

ADM02's account reveals a more theoretically deliberate approach to technique selection, though applied against health behavior frameworks rather than SDT. He described using the Transtheoretical Model to restructure challenges so participants at any stage of behavior readiness could engage: 'We kind of remodeled some of the challenges so that like it could encompass quite a bit of people and just kind of like meet them where they were at' (ADM02). He applied the Health Belief Model to biometric screening components, using participant health data to address perceived susceptibility to disease (ADM02). Goal Setting Theory structured the FitStart challenge: 'By bringing attention to the goal, it increases the action and effort, which grows the persistence of a person actually wanting to complete the action' (ADM02). These accounts provide evidence of theory-based technique selection, but against health behavior change frameworks, not SDT. Items 5 and 7 through 10, which assess whether techniques are linked to specific theoretical constructs, would score positively against a Transtheoretical Model or Goal Setting Theory evaluative standard. Against the SDT evaluative standard applied in this assessment, they do not.

The occupational wellness dimension warrants specific attention as the program component most proximate to SDT's autonomy and competence constructs. ADM02 described an initiative he proposed approximately one year ago to integrate wellness goals into annual performance reviews and embed health coaching into professional development structures: "My initial goal that I presented to [ADM01] about a year ago was for wellness to be integrated in

personal development... a wellness goal within the annual assessment and your annual review" (ADM02). This proposal represents the closest the program has come to engaging the competence and autonomy conditions SDT identifies as most relevant to retention, career development, goal progress, and meaningful professional growth. However, the initiative has not been implemented. ADM02 described friction from both leadership and employees: concerns about accountability, resistance to being assessed on health behaviors, and institutional inertia around the annual review structure. The proposal exists as practitioner intent rather than program design, and the TCS assesses the latter. The occupational wellness dimension as currently documented describes governance participation, compliance training, and skill-building modules in terms of professional development broadly rather than linking them to psychological need support specifically. The named interventions available across the full program, WeightWatchers, Full Plate Living, biometric screenings, mammograms, and flu shots, are exclusively physical health programs, none of which address the autonomy, competence, or relatedness conditions SDT identifies as most consequential for motivation and retention (Human Resources, 2025).

The program's choice architecture and social features, the two components producing positive scores on Items 6 and 11, remain the program's closest points of implicit SDT alignment. The "Your Plan, Your Way" structure offering participant selection from more than 400 activities implicitly supports autonomy, and the team challenge features implicitly support relatedness. These alignments are genuine. They are also incidental, neither was designed with SDT constructs in mind, and neither addresses the workplace autonomy, career competence, or organizational relatedness that institutional research established as the structural drivers of administrative staff departure (Salon, 2026). The program supports need satisfaction within a

bounded wellness context while leaving the structural sources of need frustration in the workplace entirely unaddressed.

Theory Evaluation (Items 13-19)

Items 13 through 19 assess whether the program measures theory-relevant constructs using validated instruments, tests for mediation effects, discusses results in theoretical terms, and uses findings to refine its theoretical basis. No indicators were met within this domain. Program evaluation relies primarily on participation metrics and third-party health claims data. The program's portal description confirms that measurement focuses on physical activity tracking through device syncing and health baseline assessments rather than validated psychological need instruments, a design choice that reflects the program's person-centered, health-behavior orientation rather than a theoretically grounded approach to measuring the motivational constructs SDT identifies as most consequential for retention (Human Resources, 2026). When asked about measurement approaches, ADM01 confirmed that the primary instruments are homegrown surveys and utilization data: "Engagement participation is certainly a biggie... probably mostly surveys and participation rates is probably what's most used" and "You really just do a homegrown one and just do the data metrics or data analytics off of that, and for the most part, it's pure numbers" (ADM01). External data from health insurance claims and the employee assistance program supplement this internal tracking: "We look at utilization rates and reports from our employees assistance program... from our claims experience from our health insurance" (ADM01). The program's mental health support operates through the Magellan EAP, a third-party clinical referral service addressing anxiety, depression, and substance abuse, downstream consequences of psychological distress rather than the upstream need frustration conditions SDT identifies as the primary drivers of motivational decline and turnover intention

(Human Resources, 2025).

ADM02's account corroborates this measurement pattern while adding one important development. He confirmed that program evaluation has historically relied on participation rates and annual surveys: "That's how I knew that the awareness was just not there... our awareness really spiked up... because like our the data we got back from just the year of putting branding first instead of everything else has really helped" (ADM02). He also described a forthcoming external assessment through Blue Cross Blue Shield initiated on the day of the interview: "We're getting an external assessment of our program today, actually... because we know we've grown and the awareness is there we want to make sure we're doing the things that in the industry are being done... where are we leading, where are we falling behind" (ADM02). This external assessment represents the first systematic evaluation of the program against industry standards since its inception. Notably, ADM02 described it as an industry benchmarking exercise, assessing whether the program is doing what other wellness programs do, rather than a theory-based evaluation of whether the program addresses the psychological mechanisms driving the outcomes it is meant to produce. The distinction is precisely what the TCS is designed to surface: an industry benchmarking assessment answers whether the program is meeting wellness industry standards; a theory-informed assessment answers whether it is designed to address the conditions most responsible for the outcomes it is meant to change. The Blue Cross Blue Shield assessment, while a meaningful step toward external accountability, does not satisfy any Theory Evaluation TCS items because it does not measure SDT constructs, test mediation effects, or evaluate outcomes in theoretical terms.

ADM02 also described an aspiration to develop more rigorous measurement over time, particularly as the wellness platform matures and campus-specific data becomes available:

"Creating these new challenges, creating these new initiatives with actual theories and behavior models behind them... once they kind of get over that, once it becomes the new norm, that's when the data is really going to show the impact" (ADM02). This forward-looking orientation suggests awareness within the team that current measurement is insufficient, but as with the theoretical documentation finding in Theory Specification, aspiration and current practice are different objects of assessment for TCS purposes. None of these measurement approaches assess autonomy, competence, or relatedness satisfaction or frustration. None are designed to evaluate the psychological mechanisms through which program participation might influence motivation or turnover intention. The Gallup engagement survey, which ADM02 identified as the institution's primary employee measurement investment, assesses engagement broadly but does not measure SDT's three need constructs specifically. It does not distinguish between need satisfaction and need frustration, the dual-process distinction empirical research at this institution established as the most consequential predictor of turnover intention.

Qualitative Context: The Practitioner-Led Design and the "Oneness" Mandate

Practitioner-Led Design

This non-theoretical approach aligns directly with the professional orientation of the design team, offering an analytical explanation for why the program's functional maturity has not translated into explicit SDT grounding. Rather than implying the program was intended to follow an SDT model, this assessment uses the TCS as an external analytical lens to evaluate the program's implicit capacity to support psychological needs. As noted previously, the administrators' design philosophy is rooted in practical kinesiology, fitness management, and health science rather than formal behavior-change frameworks. ADM01 explicitly captured this orientation, stating: "I don't hold to like a very specific theory, textbook sort of thing... my

background, my degree, is exercise, fitness management". This professional focus explains why the platform succeeds at targeting physical health and individual wellness behaviors, while simultaneously explaining the structural gap where the program tools fail to interface with the macro-level institutional need frustrations that drive employee exit.

In contrast, ADM02 brings a distinct professional orientation, explicitly referring to four individual health behavior change frameworks applied directly to program design: the Transtheoretical Model of Change, the Health Belief Model, Goal Setting Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory. The Transtheoretical Model directly informed a structural redesign of wellness challenges to accommodate participants across varying stages of readiness, with Admin B noting that "anybody at any point could funnel in, if you're in contemplation, precontemplation, if you're in action... you could funnel into the challenge." The Health Belief Model guided the biometric screening and health assessment components to provide participants with localized data intended to shape their personal health risk perceptions. Furthermore, Goal Setting Theory was embedded into specific platform milestones to increase user effort and persistence, while Social Cognitive Theory served as the framework for a planned campus ambassador program designed to leverage environmental modeling to shift health behavior norms across diverse campus locations.

Critically, ADM02 acknowledged that this theoretical grounding remains localized and informal rather than institutionalized within formal program documentation. When asked whether the theoretical basis for these challenges is recorded, ADM02 shared that administrative tracking efforts ultimately did not sustain: "I tried... I created the document, I presented the document but it never really took off. We didn't fill out the document with every challenge... in corporate, obviously I would have to present like the ROI and everything. Here we don't have to,

so it kind of just fell off." This operational gap between an administrator's individual theoretical knowledge and formal institutional documentation provides the precise empirical explanation for why the program artifacts score a zero on the Theory Specification domain of the TCS. The behavioral frameworks are actively deployed in field practices, but they are not embedded in the program's official, written design logic.

Taken together, these administrative accounts reveal a team that is highly sophisticated and practically well-deployed, yet institutionally undocumented. ADM01's experience-based approach and ADM02's application of behavior change models produce an intervention that is far more theoretically informed in day-to-day practice than its formal manuals suggest. However, from an external evaluative standpoint, this analysis highlights a fundamental architectural mismatch. The frameworks utilized by the design team, while theoretically robust, are health behavior change models engineered to drive individual wellness outcomes. Consequently, they operate at a completely different analytical level than the systemic organizational conditions driving employee departure. For example, goal-setting mechanics are effectively deployed to help employees pursue personal fitness milestones, but they are structurally unequipped to address the macro-level career development stagnation and need thwarters identified as the primary drivers of institutional turnover intention. The program team possesses real theoretical sophistication; it is simply pointed at individual health behaviors rather than the broader structural conditions accelerating employee exit.

Oneness Mandate

A second contextual factor shaping the program's design is the institutional structure of centralized delivery across all three campuses. ADM01 described the program explicitly as a unified, centrally administered initiative: "One employee wellness program that serves all 3

campuses... one out of central HR" (ADM01). The program's campus-specific documentation reflects this philosophy directly, opening with the framing "Although we are one university, each campus does offer its own amenities", positioning campus differences as variations in physical resources rather than structural conditions requiring differentiated programmatic responses (Human Resources, 2025). Campus-specific amenities are documented for all three named locations which include a dedicated fitness facility and health services, and the satellite campus lists six resources including a fitness center, pharmacy, dental clinic, diabetes center, and YMCA access. The satellite campus receives equitable physical wellness resources, more named amenities than the main campus. What the campus-specific documentation also reveals, however, is that every named resource address individual physical health infrastructure. No campus lists resources addressing the organizational conditions SDT identifies as most consequential for retention, decision-making authority, career development pathways, or structural supports for psychological need satisfaction. The program achieves physical equity across campus locations while remaining equally silent on structural need frustration at every location.

ADM02's account complicates this picture in an important way. He described the wellness platform transition as partly motivated by the desire to move beyond uniform delivery toward campus-specific responsiveness: "I can't do the things that I'm doing in MAIN and SAT and expect the same result... now I could literally get data back from SAT... I can now create and highlight more nutrition aspects through this platform... that will not affect the other campuses" (ADM02). He explicitly named the satellite campus as a motivation for the ambassador program: "That's one of the things I want to make sure that we get right. Because of satellite" (ADM02). This suggests the oneness mandate describes the program's current state rather than its intended

direction, the team is actively working toward campus-specific adaptability, and the wellness transition was in part a deliberate step in that direction.

This distinction between current implementation and intended direction is analytically important. The TCS assessment evaluates the program as currently designed and documented, and in its current form, uniform delivery without explicit SDT grounding produces the score of 2 out of 19 reported above. ADM02's aspirational direction, however, points toward a more differentiated and theoretically grounded program that does not yet exist in the documentary record. The gap between where the program is and where ADM02 is trying to take it is itself a finding: the institutional conditions, the absence of ROI accountability, the friction from leadership and employees around accountability structures, the recency of the platform transition, have prevented his theoretical knowledge and campus-differentiation ambitions from being institutionalized in program design. This gap between practitioner intent and institutional documentation is precisely what the TCS is designed to surface, and it is what a score of 2 out of 19 reflects.

Summary of Results

Across all three TCS domains, the wellness program demonstrated minimal explicit theoretical grounding against the SDT evaluative standard, with a total score of 2 out of 19 indicators present. The two positive indicators reflected implicit rather than explicit SDT alignment, choice architecture that incidentally supports autonomy and social features that incidentally support relatedness, neither of which was grounded in SDT principles by design. The program's occupational wellness dimension showed the closest proximity to the competence and autonomy conditions established as most consequential for retention at this institution, but without explicit theoretical linkage those features cannot be systematically evaluated, refined, or

targeted to the population most at risk of departure.

The administrator interviews revealed a more complex organizational picture than the documentary record alone suggests. The two administrators represent meaningfully different theoretical orientations: ADM01 brings practitioner experience in exercise and fitness management applied through the SAMHSA 8 Dimensions content taxonomy, while ADM02 brings explicit behavior change theory knowledge, Transtheoretical Model, Health Belief Model, Goal Setting Theory, and Social Cognitive Theory, applied informally to challenge design and program development. Together they constitute a theoretically diverse team whose collective knowledge exceeds what the program's formal documentation reflects. Three features of this organizational picture explain why that theoretical knowledge has not translated into TCS scores. First, neither administrator's theoretical orientation is SDT, the frameworks in active use address individual health behavior change rather than the organizational need conditions most relevant to retention. Second, ADM02's theoretical grounding is individual and undocumented rather than institutionalized in program design, he created theoretical documentation for one challenge before the practice fell off without institutional accountability structures to sustain it. Third, ADM02's most retention-relevant initiative, integrating the wellness goals into annual performance reviews and embedding health coaching into professional development, exists as practitioner intent rather than implemented program design, blocked by institutional friction from leadership and employees alike.

The qualitative context situates this scoring pattern within two institutional conditions that together explain the gap between practitioner knowledge and program documentation. The practitioner-led design philosophy, experience-based for ADM01, behavior-theory-informed for ADM02, has produced a program that is functionally mature, participatory, and responsive to

employee feedback. What it has not produced is explicit alignment between program components and the SDT constructs most consequential for retention. The oneness mandate, while actively being challenged by ADM02's push for campus-specific adaptability through the wellness platform transition and the planned ambassador program, currently produces uniform delivery that cannot be differentiated to address the satellite-specific structural conditions institutional research identified as primary drivers of turnover (Salon, 2026). The gap between where the program is and where ADM02 is trying to take it is itself a finding, institutional conditions including absent ROI accountability, leadership friction, and the recency of the platform transition have prevented his theoretical ambitions from being institutionalized in program design.

Review of all six public-facing program pages: About, Portal, Programs, EAP, At Your Campus, and Wellness Benefit Resources, confirmed that no page references SDT, behavior change theory, or psychological need constructs in any form. The program's complete resource inventory is extrinsic in SDT terms, addressing financial benefits, physical health services, and institutional perks rather than the intrinsic motivational conditions most consequential for retention (Human Resources, 2025, 2026). The forthcoming Blue Cross Blue Shield external assessment represents the program's first systematic external evaluation, but as an industry benchmarking exercise rather than a theory-informed assessment, it will not produce the psychological need outcome data necessary to evaluate the program's retention relevance against the psychological need conditions established as most responsible for administrative staff departure at this institution.

Discussion

The TCS assessment of the wellness program yields a finding that is analytically precise

but institutionally consequential: a program positioned as a retention-adjacent initiative scores 2 out of 19 on the Theory Coding Scheme against an SDT evaluative standard, indicating that its design is not explicitly grounded in the psychological theory the prior two papers establish as most relevant to the retention problem it is meant to address. This finding requires careful interpretation. The Results do not reveal a program without theoretical awareness, ADM02 brings genuine behavior change theory knowledge to his work, and his aspirations for integrating wellness into professional development and differentiating programming by campus reflect a sophisticated understanding of what retention-relevant programming would require. What the TCS score reveals is a program whose theoretical awareness has not been institutionalized in its design documentation, whose active theoretical frameworks address individual health behavior rather than organizational need conditions, and whose most retention-relevant initiatives remain aspirational rather than implemented. The gap between what the program's practitioners know and what the program's design documents show is the central finding this discussion interprets.

This discussion is organized into two sections. First, Theoretical Analysis interprets the TCS findings through the SDT lens, examining the program's engagement strategy, the distinction between functional and structural support, and the decoupling of centralized design from satellite-specific need, with implications drawn from each frame. Second, Implications translates these findings into actionable recommendations for institutional policy, management practice, and future research.

Theoretical Analysis

The Strategy (Engagement as a Proxy for Retention)

The institution's investment in the wellness program reflects a deliberate organizational logic: supporting holistic employee well-being will foster engagement, and engaged employees

are less likely to leave. This logic is not without empirical support, SDT research consistently shows that when employees perceive their broader needs as supported, motivation shifts toward more autonomous, internalized commitment, which is associated with lower turnover intentions (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2017). The program's expansion from basic health incentives to a comprehensive eight-dimension platform reflects institutional recognition that retention requires more than physical wellness programming, a trajectory ADM01 described explicitly: "We try to take a pretty holistic approach, the whole person and their experience of being human and an employee and how that all interacts with each other" (ADM01).

ADM02 confirmed that retention is an explicit goal of the program team: "Retention. I actually haven't written down right here. Retention, higher morale and employee pride, trust and commitment... what's the turnover metric, you know, and what are we looking at" (ADM02). This confirmation is significant because it establishes that the program is positioned as a retention mechanism not only institutionally but within the program team's own understanding of its purpose. The engagement-as-proxy-for-retention logic is not merely an external characterization, it reflects how the administrators themselves understand the program's contribution to workforce stability.

The TCS findings reveal, however, that the engagement logic operates without explicit connection to the psychological mechanisms SDT identifies as most consequential for retention. The program monitors engagement through participation rates, homegrown surveys, and third-party claims data, none of which measure autonomy, competence, or relatedness satisfaction or frustration. As ADM01 confirmed, evaluation is primarily quantitative and participation-driven: "Engagement participation is certainly a biggie... for the most part, it's pure numbers" (ADM01). The forthcoming external assessment will benchmark the program against industry standards, a

meaningful accountability step, but will not produce the psychological need outcome data necessary to evaluate whether engagement is translating into the autonomous motivation SDT identifies as protective against turnover. A program evaluated on participation metrics and industry benchmarks rather than psychological need outcomes cannot determine whether staff are engaging with wellness activities while continuing to experience the structural need frustration established as the primary driver of administrative staff departure decisions at this institution. Engagement, in this configuration, functions as a proxy for retention rather than a mechanism for it.

Functional vs. Structural (The Nature of the Support)

A closer examination of the TCS domain scores clarifies the nature of the program's partial alignment with SDT. The two positive indicators, Items 6 and 11, both reflected the program's choice architecture: the "Your Plan, Your Way" structure offering participants selection from more than 400 activities implicitly supports autonomy, and the team challenge features implicitly support relatedness. These alignments are genuine and not trivial, they represent design decisions that produce real psychological benefits at the individual level. Administrator 1's description of the program's inclusivity philosophy captures this orientation precisely: "We want to meet people where they're at... taking care of your health and well-being is for everyone" (ADM01).

ADM02's theoretical work adds a further dimension to this picture. His application of the Transtheoretical Model to challenge design, the Health Belief Model to biometric screenings, and Goal Setting Theory to the FitStart challenge represents genuinely theory-based technique selection, and against a health behavior change evaluative standard, several additional TCS items would score positively. The program is more theoretically grounded in practice than its

documentation suggests. The critical limitation, however, is not the absence of theoretical thinking but its direction: ADM02's frameworks are applied to individual health behavior change rather than to the organizational conditions that produce need frustration and diminish need satisfaction. Goal setting is used to help employees pursue fitness goals, not to address the career development stagnation identified as the strongest overall organizational predictor of turnover intention in the structural model ($r = .68$). The Health Belief Model is used to help employees understand their cholesterol numbers, not to address the perceived susceptibility to departure that autonomy frustration produces. The theoretical sophistication exists within the program team. it is simply pointed at the wrong level of the problem.

The remaining 17 TCS indicators measure wellness program engagement but fail to address the organizational conditions producing need frustration documented in prior institutional research. Program autonomy, choosing between step challenges and financial webinars, bears no relation to workplace autonomy, the strongest empirical predictor of turnover intention at this institution ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration). Similarly, 30-day habit challenges target personal health behaviors but ignore career goal stagnation, the institution's dominant organizational stressor ($r = .68$). Social challenges may build participant community but do not remedy the organizational invisibility identified as satellite staff's most debilitating form of disconnection, or "benign neglect." The wellness program thus treats individual symptoms of a systemic problem. In SDT terms, it supports need satisfaction within a bounded wellness context while leaving the structural workplace sources of both need frustration and diminished need satisfaction entirely unaddressed.

The institution's complete retention-adjacent resource framework confirms this pattern at

the broadest level. Documented across insurance, retirement planning, tuition benefits, clinical health services, campus fitness access, and the EAP, every resource the institution provides addresses financial security, physical health, or institutional perks, all extrinsic in SDT terms (Human Resources, 2026). Nothing in the complete resource inventory addresses the intrinsic motivational conditions SDT identifies as most consequential for sustained retention: autonomy in decision-making, competence development through career pathways, or relatedness through meaningful organizational connection. The gap between what the institution provides and what SDT identifies as necessary is not a gap in a single program, it is a gap in the institution's entire conception of what retention support requires.

This distinction carries a specific implication for institutional leadership. The program's functional maturity, its breadth of offerings, accessible delivery, and consistent implementation across three campuses, can create the appearance of a comprehensive retention response when the structural conditions most responsible for administrative exit remain unchanged. A functionally sophisticated program that does not engage these conditions will not produce the retention outcomes the institution seeks, regardless of its participation rates or engagement metric.

The Decoupling (Standardization vs. Context)

The centralization of the wellness program under a single HR infrastructure reflects a deliberate institutional strategy that Administrator 1 described as unified delivery: "One employee wellness program that serves all 3 campuses... one out of central HR" (ADM01). This structure achieves administrative efficiency and ensures equitable access to program resources across campus locations, the satellite campus lists six physical wellness amenities, more than the Norman main campus's three, confirming that physical resource equity has been achieved. The

decoupling this assessment identifies is not geographic resource inequity but theoretical: the program's uniform design cannot be differentiated to address the satellite-specific psychological need conditions established as primary drivers of turnover at this institution.

ADM02's account reveals active movement against this decoupling. His motivation for the wellness platform transition was partly the desire for campus-specific data and targeted programming: "I can't do the things that I'm doing in MAIN and SAT and expect the same result... now I could literally get data back from SAT... I can now create and highlight more nutrition aspects through this platform that will not affect the other campuses" (ADM02). He explicitly named the satellite campus as a motivation for the ambassador program: "That's one of the things I want to make sure that we get right. Because of satellite" (ADM02). These aspirations represent the closest the program has come to recognizing that satellite-specific conditions require satellite-specific responses.

The limitation of this movement, however, is its scope. The campus differentiation ADM02 describes is nutritional content and activity emphasis, which wellness dimensions to highlight per campus based on participation data. This is differentiation at the functional level: adjusting which individual health activities are promoted at each location. It does not constitute differentiation at the structural level: addressing the asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect established as the organizational conditions producing need frustration among satellite staff (Salon, 2026). The ambassador program, if implemented as described, would place a wellness champion within satellite departments, supporting relatedness through social connection and environmental modeling of health behaviors. It would not address the centralized governance structure that frustrates autonomy, the absence of career development pathways that frustrate competence, or the organizational invisibility that erodes relatedness at its

structural rather than interpersonal level.

This distinction between functional and structural differentiation carries a specific theoretical implication for how institutions design retention interventions in geographically distributed systems. Differentiating which health activities are promoted at each campus is an administrative solution to a content problem. It is not a solution to the context-specific psychological need frustration that drives satellite campus turnover. Effective retention programming in multi-campus systems requires structural differentiation: programs that can be adapted to address the organizational conditions most relevant to each campus population rather than the health behavior patterns most prevalent there. The TCS assessment demonstrates that the wellness program has not achieved this structural differentiation. The institutional conditions ADM02 describes absent ROI accountability, leadership friction, and the recency of the platform transition, suggest that achieving it would require not just program modification but a reconsideration of what wellness programming is institutionally for.

Implications

Policy Implications

The TCS findings carry three structural policy implications for institutions seeking to align wellness programming with the retention conditions SDT identifies as most consequential. First, institutions should require that wellness programs positioned as retention initiatives undergo formal theory-based impact assessments prior to implementation and at regular intervals thereafter. The current program evolved through practitioner experience and participation data without systematic evaluation of whether its components address the psychological conditions driving turnover, an approach that produces functionally mature programming without the theoretical grounding necessary to evaluate or improve its retention impact. The forthcoming

external assessment represents a meaningful step toward external accountability, but as an industry benchmarking exercise it will assess whether the program meets wellness industry standards rather than whether it addresses the psychological mechanisms driving the outcomes it is meant to change. Requiring theory-based assessment as a condition of institutional investment in wellness programming, not merely industry benchmarking, would ensure that programs are designed to address the mechanisms driving the outcomes they are meant to change.

Second, policy frameworks governing wellness program delivery in multi-campus systems should mandate structural differentiation rather than uniform delivery. The oneness mandate that governs wellness program's current implementation reflects a policy choice, administrative efficiency over contextual responsiveness, that the TCS findings demonstrate has retention consequences. ADM02's push for campus-specific data and targeted programming through the wellness program transition represents exactly the kind of differentiation this policy should formalize not merely adjusting which health activities are promoted at each location but establishing protocols that allow satellite campus administrators to address the organizational conditions, centralized governance, limited career development, geographic isolation, most relevant to their specific populations. This does not require separate programs for each campus; it requires that the centralized program has a structurally differentiated implementation layer that current design and policy do not authorize.

Third, institutional mission statements and HR policy frameworks should explicitly distinguish between wellness programming, which supports individual health and well-being, and retention programming, which addresses the organizational conditions that frustrate the psychological needs essential for sustained motivation. ADM02's confirmation that retention, higher morale, and employee pride are implicit program goals, goals the team holds but has not

formally operationalized, illustrates precisely the problem this policy distinction would address. Treating wellness and retention as equivalent, as the current program's positioning implicitly does, produces the engagement-as-proxy-for-retention logic the TCS assessment identifies as the program's fundamental strategic limitation. Explicitly separating these functions in policy would create the institutional space necessary to develop retention initiatives that engage structural conditions rather than individual symptoms.

Practice Implications

At the management and program implementation level, the TCS findings identify three areas where the program's functional maturity can be extended toward structural engagement without requiring complete redesign, and where ADM02's existing proposals provide a concrete starting point.

First, ADM02's proposal to integrate wellness goals into annual performance reviews and embed health coaching into professional development structures should be treated as a priority implementation initiative rather than an aspirational idea facing institutional friction. His framework includes three components: a wellness goal embedded in the annual assessment, health coaching sessions integrated into professional development, and accountability structures that reward goal progress rather than penalizing shortfalls. Together these directly target the competence and autonomy conditions established as the strongest predictors of turnover intention at this institution. The institutional friction he describes, leadership concerns about accountability and employee resistance to being assessed on health behaviors, reflects the same structural inertia that produces need frustration in the first place. Addressing this friction requires explicit leadership endorsement of the integration proposal, framed not as an additional burden on employees but as an institutional signal that professional growth and well-being are

institutional priorities rather than individual responsibilities. The occupational wellness dimension provides the programmatic infrastructure for this integration; what is needed is institutional authorization to implement it.

Second, the program's existing data infrastructure, participation metrics, homegrown surveys, and third-party claims data, should be augmented with validated SDT measurement instruments administered at regular intervals. ADM02's description of wanting more rigorous data as the wellness platform matures, "creating these new challenges, creating these new initiatives with actual theories and behavior models behind them... that's when the data is really going to show the impact" (ADM02), reflects an awareness within the team that current measurement is insufficient. Adding a brief BPNSFS subscale to the existing survey infrastructure would allow the program to monitor autonomy, competence, and relatedness satisfaction and frustration across campus populations, producing the psychological need data that the current evaluation framework lacks. This addition would transform the program's thermometer function, monitoring individual health behaviors, into a diagnostic function capable of detecting whether structural conditions are producing the need frustration that drives turnover. It would also provide the outcome data ADM02 needs to make the ROI case for his retention-relevant proposals to institutional leadership.

Third, satellite campus administrators should be granted explicit authority to adapt program incentives and activities to address locally identified structural stressors. ADM02's stated aspiration, "That's one of the things I want to make sure that we get right. Because of satellite" (ADM02), confirms that the program team already recognizes the satellite campus as requiring differentiated attention. Formalizing this recognition through a localized subsidiarity protocol, allowing satellite campus wellness champions to adapt program components to address

the specific organizational conditions institutional research documented, would convert aspirational awareness into implemented design. Rather than requiring satellite staff to engage with a program designed for the institutional center, localized adaptation would allow the program to meet satellite staff in their specific organizational context, addressing the benign neglect dynamic identified as a primary driver of relatedness frustration (Salon, 2026).

Research Implications

The TCS assessment of the wellness program opens four productive lines of future inquiry, the fourth of which emerges directly from ADM02's interview findings.

First, the finding that a functionally mature wellness program can score 2 out of 19 on the TCS while achieving strong participation metrics raises important questions about the relationship between program engagement and psychological need outcomes. Future research should examine whether participation in wellness programs that lack explicit SDT grounding produces measurable changes in need satisfaction or frustration over time, and whether those changes, or their absence, are associated with actual turnover behavior rather than turnover intention alone. Longitudinal designs tracking need satisfaction scores, program participation, and turnover outcomes over 12 to 24 months would provide the evidence base necessary to evaluate whether implicit SDT alignment produces retention benefits comparable to those associated with explicitly grounded programs.

Second, the implicit versus explicit SDT alignment distinction this assessment identifies warrants further theoretical development. The program's choice architecture and social features implicitly support autonomy and relatedness without explicitly targeting them, a pattern likely common across wellness programs that adopt engagement-driven design philosophies. Research should examine whether explicit theoretical grounding produces meaningfully different

psychological outcomes than implicit alignment, and whether the gap between the two is moderated by the degree to which the program's implicit alignments correspond to the specific need frustrations most prevalent in the target population. For administrative staff populations where autonomy frustration is the dominant driver of turnover, a program that implicitly supports autonomy within a wellness context may produce different outcomes than one explicitly designed to address workplace autonomy constraints.

Third, the development of a satellite-campus-specific TCS application protocol would enable more targeted theory-informed assessments of retention programming in geographically distributed institutional contexts. The standard TCS was designed for health behavior interventions and does not include items specifically addressing the structural conditions, geographic isolation, asymmetric power dynamics, centralized governance, that this dissertation identifies as the primary drivers of satellite campus need frustration. A modified instrument that incorporates these structural dimensions alongside the standard TCS items would produce more diagnostically precise assessments of whether retention programs are designed to address the conditions most responsible for turnover in peripheral organizational units.

Fourth, the gap between practitioner theoretical knowledge and institutional documentation, illustrated by ADM02's behavior change theory expertise that has not been institutionalized in program design, represents an underexplored implementation science question with direct relevance to wellness program development in higher education. Research should examine what organizational conditions enable or prevent the institutionalization of practitioner theoretical knowledge in program documentation and design. ADM02's account identified three specific barriers: absent ROI accountability structures that would require theoretical documentation, institutional friction from leadership and employees around

accountability mechanisms, and the recency of the platform transition that has not yet allowed new theoretical initiatives to take root. Future studies examining how these barriers operate across wellness programs in higher education, and what structural conditions enable practitioners like ADM02 to translate individual theoretical knowledge into institutional program design, would advance both implementation science and the practical development of theory-grounded wellness programming in multi-campus systems.

Conclusion

This theory-informed assessment of the university's wellness program reveals a finding that is more nuanced than a simple misalignment between institutional intent and program design. The wellness program is administered by a team with genuine theoretical awareness, one administrator brings practitioner expertise grounded in exercise science and the SAMHSA 8 Dimensions framework, while the other brings explicit behavior change theory knowledge across four frameworks and ambitious proposals for integrating wellness into professional development and differentiating programming by campus. The program is functionally mature, equitably delivered across campus locations, and actively evolving toward greater theoretical sophistication and campus-specific responsiveness. These are not trivial institutional investments, and they reflect a program team that understands, at least implicitly, that retention requires more than physical wellness programming.

What a Theory Coding Scheme score of 2 out of 19 indicators present reveals, however, is the gap between what the program team knows and what the program's design documents show, and between where the program's most ambitious practitioner wants to take it and where institutional conditions have allowed it to go. The program's theoretical grounding is individual and undocumented rather than institutional and explicit. Its behavior changes frameworks

address individual health outcomes rather than the organizational conditions SDT identifies as most consequential for retention. Its most retention-relevant initiative, integrating wellness goals into annual performance reviews and embedding health coaching into professional development, exists as practitioner intent facing institutional friction rather than implemented program design. And its campus differentiation aspirations, while genuine and partially enabled by the wellness platform transition, operate at the functional level of content adjustment rather than the structural level of organizational condition response.

Against the SDT evaluative standard, the program functions as a thermometer rather than a treatment. It monitors individual well-being through participation metrics, homegrown surveys, and third-party health claims data, generating signals of where employees are struggling without engaging the structural conditions producing that struggle. The conditions established as the primary drivers of administrative staff departure, constrained autonomy, foreclosed career development, and organizational invisibility, remain outside the program's current scope not because the program team is unaware of them but because the institutional conditions that would allow the program to address them have not been established. The absence of ROI accountability structures, the friction around connecting wellness to performance review, and the recency of the platform transition have collectively prevented the program's most theoretically sophisticated practitioner from institutionalizing his knowledge in program design.

This assessment demonstrates the practical value of applying the Theory Coding Scheme against an SDT evaluative standard as a tool for higher education program evaluation. Rather than assessing whether a program generates participation or meets industry benchmarks, both of which the wellness program does, TCS-SDT evaluation asks whether a program is designed to address the psychological mechanisms driving the outcomes it is meant to change. The

forthcoming external assessment will tell the institution whether the wellness program is doing what other wellness programs do. The gap between those two questions is the gap between a wellness program and a retention program, and closing it requires not program modification alone but a fundamental reorientation of the institutional conditions within which the program operates. The synthesis chapter that follows integrates the findings of all three papers into the Integrated Triad for Systemic Change, a theoretically grounded framework that positions wellness program’s diagnostic data as the foundation for the structural reforms and leadership development initiatives this assessment demonstrates are necessary but currently beyond the program's institutional reach.

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Synthesis and Implications

The Logic of Inquiry: From Local Observation to Systemic Discovery

This dissertation was born from an organizational paradox observed through the lens of a scholar-practitioner. During a five-year tenure at a satellite campus, I witnessed an alarming rate of turnover within critical support roles, most notably evidenced by the departure of four successive Human Resource business leads. This localized turnover served as the catalyst for the current inquiry. It raised a fundamental question that the existing literature, largely focused on faculty and main-campus dynamics, has yet to adequately answer: Why is the "administrative nervous system" of the university failing, and what are the structural roots of this instability?

To unravel this systemic problem, the investigation utilized a sequential mixed-methods case design. This framework allowed the empirical inquiry to progress from a qualitative baseline diagnostic phase into a broad psychometric validation, and finally, into a rigorous theory-informed assessment of the program deployed by the institution to address staff well-being.

Phase 1: The Diagnostic Journey

The inquiry began at the operational frontier of the satellite campus, where the effects of turnover are most acute due to the structural prevalence of one-person departments. During this initial qualitative phase, I diagnosed the specific organizational mechanisms driving attrition. The findings revealed that staff were not experiencing routine job dissatisfaction; rather, they were subjected to systematic basic psychological need frustration. The emergent themes of 'forced generalism' and 'asymmetric power dynamics' stood out as primary stressors that actively undermined the workplace autonomy and competence required for long-term retention.

Phase 2: The Scalability and Scope Phase

Discovery at the localized level prompted the subsequent quantitative phase of the research, which sought to determine whether these stressors were unique to the satellite experience or indicative of a broader institutional pathology. By expanding the inquiry system-wide through a cross-sectional survey, a major insight emerged. The finding of no statistically significant difference in basic psychological need frustration between main and satellite campuses demonstrated that turnover drivers are systemic rather than geographic. This suggests that the 'Oneness Mandate', the institution's insistence on centralized uniformity, effectively homogenizes and exports structural stressors to every corner of the university system, regardless of physical location.

Phase 3: The Evaluation of Current Solutions

Having mapped the systemic scope of employee need frustration across the university network, the final evaluative phase audited the institution's primary structural retention mechanism: the wellness program. Utilizing Michie and Prestwich's (2010) Theory Coding Scheme (TCS) scored against a Self-Determination Theory standard, this phase evaluated whether the university's programmatic response aligned with the specific psychological vulnerabilities exposed in the preceding chapters. The audit unmasked a critical design mismatch. Although the program has conceptually evolved from a rigid 'wellness' platform to a holistic 'well-being' model, it remains an individualistic solution misapplied to a structural pathology. It fundamentally promotes personal resilience while leaving the systemic frustration of workplace autonomy and competence entirely unaddressed.

This chapter is organized into four sections. First, Cross-Phase Integration synthesizes the converging and diverging findings across the sequential methodologies and answers the overarching research question. Second, Theoretical Contributions advances SDT's organizational

framework by defining the dual-process distinction between need satisfaction and need frustration, introducing three satellite-specific constructs that emerged from the integrated data, and proposing the *Integrated Triad for Systemic Change* as a theoretically grounded retention model. Third, Theory of Change translates this triad into a prospective, SDT-based implementation model featuring clear theoretical rationales and transferability guidance for geographically distributed institutions. Fourth, Implications and Conclusion identify what the multi-phase sequential design collectively reveals for institutional practice and future research that no single method could establish in isolation, before closing with a final synthesis statement.

The Synthesis: A Theory of Change

The synthesis of these empirical phases reveals that administrative turnover is not a failure of individual employee resilience, but a direct byproduct of a structural environment that prioritizes centralized compliance over professional autonomy. This case study concludes by offering a theory-informed Theory of Change rooted in Self-Determination Theory. To retain this vital segment of the higher education workforce, the institution must move beyond 'thermometer' programs that merely monitor stress and instead adopt active 'treatment' strategies that systematically redesign administrative roles to support the fundamental human needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness.

The Structural Conclusion

Administrative staff turnover at this institution is not a product of individual disengagement but a structural outcome. It is produced by institutional conditions that systematically frustrate psychological needs and erode the supportive environment essential for sustained motivation. This outcome is compounded by an institutional retention strategy that merely monitors individual well-being without engaging those conditions at their source. The

initial qualitative phase of this case study unmasked the specific mechanisms of that frustration: centralized control that erodes autonomy, forced generalism that forecloses career development, and institutional invisibility that severs relatedness.

Subsequently, the quantitative survey phase confirmed the statistical weight of these mechanisms among 447 responding administrative staff. Within this psychometric model, need satisfaction emerged as a strong negative predictor of turnover intention prior to controlling for need frustration ($\beta = -.601$, Model 2), with overall need satisfaction demonstrating the strongest correlation among primary study variables ($r = -.603$). Furthermore, need frustration explained significant incremental variance beyond satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$), while career goal stagnation stood out as the leading organizational stressor ($r = .68$). These metrics establish that need satisfaction and need frustration function as empirically distinct, parallel, but differential pathways operating institution-wide rather than as a satellite-specific anomaly. Finally, the theory-informed program assessment phase established that the university's primary retention-adjacent initiative scored a meager 2 out of 19 indicators on the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS). This low theoretical grounding reflects a programmatic framework that is functionally mature but structurally decoupled from the psychological conditions the preceding phases identified as driving employee departure.

The evidence across all three empirical phases points toward the same structural conclusion. Administrative staff turnover is actively produced and sustained by an institutional logic that concentrates authority at the center. Consequently, this dynamic forecloses professional development at the periphery for 80% of the workforce. The problem is then compounded by an institutional response calibrated to individual wellness rather than the underlying organizational conditions.

Cross-Phase Integration

Systemic Autonomy Frustration and Asymmetric Power Dynamics

Across the empirical spectrum of this case study, administrative staff experience need frustration as a structural condition embedded in the institution's power architecture, rather than an incidental stressor. The initial qualitative phase identified centralized control, structural barriers, and limited decision latitude as primary mechanisms constraining satellite campus staff, a dynamic participants described as both deliberate and normalized. Subsequently, the quantitative survey phase confirmed the statistical dominance of this overarching psychological dynamic. Within this psychometric model, overall need satisfaction emerged as the strongest negative correlate of employee turnover intention among the primary study variables (r = -.603, $p < .01$). Furthermore, hierarchical regression analysis demonstrated that need satisfaction functioned as a highly powerful negative predictor of turnover intent (β = -.601, $p < .001$ prior to controlling for need frustration), while the active thwarting of these needs via need frustration captured significant incremental variance ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$) in the final model.

Finally, the program assessment phase revealed that the institution's wellness response actively reproduces this centralized logic. The wellness program’s uniform 'oneness' mandate denies satellite campus leadership the local authority required to adapt programming to their specific environments. Critically, this final evaluative phase documented that internal expertise for a superior design already exists; for instance, one campus administrator successfully applied behavior change theory to propose performance-integrated wellness goals. However, deep institutional inertia, a lack of operational accountability, and underlying leadership friction prevent these insights from being institutionalized. The exact structural dynamics producing the initial autonomy frustration also govern and restrict its attempted remedies.

When integrated, the evidence across all three research phases confirms that autonomy frustration at this institution is not a localized supervisory failure. Rather, it is a systemic condition reinforced at every level of the organizational architecture. This reality is manifested through the individual management practices documented in the qualitative phase, the institution-wide psychometric dynamics confirmed in the quantitative phase, and the centralized design logic exposed during the program assessment. Collectively, these patterns illustrate how asymmetric power dynamics operate as a structural multiplier of psychological need frustration. This systemic framework actively undermines the essential conditions that Self-Determination Theory identifies as vital for sustained employee motivation, well-being, and long-term retention (Deci & Ryan, 2008; Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Forced Generalism and Competence Frustration

Through the integrated streams of this inquiry, the structural reality of forced generalism emerges as the primary engine driving employee competence frustration, systematically foreclosing the professional mastery essential for sustained engagement. The initial qualitative phase revealed satellite campus staff trapped in 'administrative catch-all' roles—simultaneously managing registration, procurement, event logistics, and human resources without the specialized boundaries that signal career progression and professional identity. Participants described this role overload not as temporary overwork, but as a permanent ceiling on their competence development, where generalist expectations effectively displace the deliberate, incremental skill-building that Self-Determination Theory identifies as essential for intrinsic motivation.

The subsequent quantitative phase highlighted the systemic scope of this dynamic, establishing career goal stagnation as the strongest overall predictor of employee turnover intention (r = .68), outpacing even the zero-order relationship of autonomy frustration.

Hierarchical regression models further confirmed the persistent explanatory power of these competence-related stressors after controlling for demographics and job characteristics. This psychometric evidence demonstrates that the psychological cost of arrested professional development operates as a universal driver of attrition across all campus locations, rather than an isolated peripheral complaint.

The final program assessment phase exposed a parallel institutional failure within the university's well-being strategy. Short-term wellness initiatives—such as 30-day habit challenges targeting personal health metrics like daily step counts, meditation minutes, and sleep patterns, bear no functional relation to the profound career stagnation eroding staff competence. The program's individualistic behaviorism, which tracks calories rather than workplace competencies, perfectly recapitulates the institutional logic that demands forced generalism while denying professional specialization. Critically, this design mismatch persists despite latent internal capacity; the TCS evaluation revealed that while program administrators are conceptually aware of the vital motivational role of professional development, they lack the structural authority to shift programmatic focus from personal wellness metrics to workplace mastery.

Ultimately, the same structural foreclosure that produces competence frustration among administrative staff also governs the institutional retention response designed to remedy it. This convergence unmasks forced generalism as both the primary catalyst and the systemic perpetuator of the university's turnover crisis.

Benign Neglect and Relatedness Frustration

Throughout the sequential phases of this case study, the phenomenon of benign neglect manifests as the institutional mechanism that systematically severs workplace relatedness,

positioning satellite campus staff as organizational outsiders despite their essential operational roles. The initial qualitative phase captured this dynamic most vividly. Satellite administrators described themselves as 'second-class citizens' who experienced a form of 'benign neglect' characterized by routine exclusion from central decision-making bodies, minimal executive leadership presence, and communication patterns that treated peripheral branches as operational afterthoughts rather than integral contributors. Participants articulated this reality not as overt structural hostility, but as an institutional invisibility, a quiet, pervasive form of disconnection that steadily erodes the mutual respect and sense of belonging that Self-Determination Theory identifies as essential for psychological relatedness.

The subsequent quantitative phase established the empirical reach of these narrative findings, confirming that relatedness frustration serves as a significant pathway in the institution-wide turnover process. While it did not emerge as the strongest zero-order predictor of attrition, relatedness operated through distinct psychological pathways that run parallel to the effects of autonomy and competence frustration. This psychometric evidence demonstrates that the social architecture of disconnection compounds other basic psychological need vulnerabilities across all campus locations, proving that relatedness frustration is a pervasive institutional condition rather than an isolated peripheral grievance.

Finally, the program assessment phase revealed how the university's wellness strategy structurally reproduces this systemic neglect. While the program's social challenges successfully build a micro-level participant community, they cannot redress deeply embedded organizational invisibility. For example, localized team step competitions foster a superficial sense of relatedness among wellness participants, but they leave untouched the systematic council exclusions, structural leadership absences, and communication blackouts that satellite staff

identified as the root causes of their isolation. The TCS evaluation documented that program administrators are aware of this operational gap, with one even proposing satellite-differentiated programming. However, the university's centralized 'oneness' governance structure prevents local adaptation, effectively perpetuating the same relational architecture that produces the turnover problem.

Benign neglect thus operates as the definitive relational infrastructure of the university's turnover crisis. It actively produces administrative staff disconnection through daily organizational practices in the qualitative phase, amplifies other underlying psychological need frustrations institution-wide in the quantitative phase, and structures institutional retention responses that ultimately recapitulate rather than resolve systemic relational deficits in the final evaluative phase.

Interconnection Across Studies

Together, these empirical phases converge on a critical finding that no single methodological step could establish in isolation: administrative staff turnover is actively produced by organizational conditions that the institution's own retention response is entirely uncalibrated to address. The research follows a deliberate diagnostic sequence. The initial phase identifies the localized mechanisms of basic psychological need frustration; the subsequent phase establishes their prevalence and predictive statistical weight across the wider institution; and the final phase evaluates whether the university's existing programmatic response directly engages those mechanisms. This evolutionary arc is only possible through the exploratory sequential mixed-methods case design deployed in this dissertation.

The relationship between the qualitative baseline and the subsequent quantitative survey represents a powerful complementarity across method and scale. The qualitative phase identified

systemic autonomy frustration, forced generalism, and benign neglect as structural conditions rooted deeply in centralized, multi-campus governance. Conversely, the quantitative phase revealed a more complex institutional picture, demonstrating that responding staff showed no statistically significant differences across campus locations regarding basic psychological need satisfaction, need frustration, or overall turnover intention.

While this cross-sectional quantitative analysis indicates that the overall magnitude and intensity of basic psychological need frustration is statistically uniform across the university system, this macro-level metric is necessarily blind to localized operational mechanics. The quantitative instruments aggregate broad institutional stressors, effectively flattening geographic distinctions. However, this mixed-methods integration reveals that a statistical null finding does not equate to structural equivalence. As demonstrated during the qualitative phase, the contextual expression of these need frustrators differs profoundly. While a main-campus employee's autonomy frustration may stem from bureaucratic inertia, a satellite-campus employee experiences it through the acute operational isolation of forced generalism. This methodological complementarity, qualitative evidence of satellite-specific mechanisms existing alongside institution-wide statistical uniformity, demonstrates the necessity of this mixed-methods approach. The survey provided the macro-lens confirming systemic scope, while the bounded qualitative inquiry offered high-resolution detail on the operational mechanics hidden deep within the aggregate data.

The relationship between the initial empirical stages and the final evaluative stage constitutes a classic contrast between organizational diagnosis and institutional response. The qualitative and overall need satisfaction operates as the strongest negative predictor of retention ($r = -.603$; $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration, $\Delta R^2 = .061$), while career goal

stagnation functions as the leading organizational stressor (r = .68). Crucially, these conditions were confirmed to operate institution wide.

The final evaluative phase then asked whether current institutional initiatives explicitly address these known drivers. The TCS assessment answered decisively. A score of just 2 out of 19 indicators of theoretical grounding, substantially below the standard occupational health intervention average of 5.8, unmasks a deeper institutional pathology. This reveals not program inadequacy alone, but systemic conditions that actively block theoretically informed practitioners from institutionalizing their specialized knowledge. The administrator who applies behavior change theory, proposes performance-integrated wellness, and recognizes unique satellite needs remains fundamentally constrained by the same centralized 'oneness' logic producing the staff frustration in the first place. These parallel structural conditions, which simultaneously cultivate employees need frustration while preventing its programmatic remedy, emerge as the central integrative finding of this dissertation, visible only through its multi-phase sequential design.

These research phases collectively demonstrate that employee turnover constitutes neither an individual motivation failure, localized managerial incompetence, nor isolated program weakness. Rather, it manifests as a deeply entrenched structural problem operating simultaneously across daily work conditions as documented in the qualitative phase, institution-wide psychological dynamics verified in the quantitative phase, and the overarching program design philosophy exposed during the evaluation. Resolving this crisis ultimately demands a coordinated, multi-level institutional intervention.

Answering the Overarching Research Question

Synthesizing the empirical evidence across all three research phases yields a clear and structurally precise answer to the overarching research question. Organizational structures at

satellite campuses drive turnover by creating an institutional buffer that separates employees from core resources, decision-making authority, and the broader organizational social fabric. This buffer systematically frustrates the basic psychological needs that Self-Determination Theory identifies as essential for sustained motivation, a structural impairment that the institution's existing retention responses are completely uncalibrated to remove.

The initial qualitative phase identified centralized control, forced generalism, and benign neglect as the primary systemic mechanisms producing psychological need frustration. The subsequent quantitative survey phase confirmed the statistical dominance of these findings among 447 participating staff members. Within this psychometric model, overall need satisfaction emerged as the strongest negative predictor of retention ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration), surpassing competence and relatedness in unique explanatory power. Concurrently, career goal stagnation manifested as the leading organizational stressor ($r = .68$), with need frustration explaining significant incremental variance beyond need satisfaction. Critically, the quantitative data established that these dynamics operate institution-wide rather than being satellite-specific. This cross-phase verification confirms that the localized qualitative mechanisms reflect structural universals across the university matrix rather than isolated geographic anomalies.

This multi-phase integration reveals a distinct, sequential turnover trajectory: structural isolation → basic psychological need frustration + eroded institutional support → emotional withdrawal → voluntary exit. The initial qualitative phase captured the vivid, lived progression of this trajectory. The quantitative phase validated this path statistically, demonstrating that basic need satisfaction and frustration function as parallel mediators across burnout, perceptions of leadership, career goals, and work-life balance. Finally, the evaluative phase confirmed the

systemic institutional blind spot that allows this trajectory to persist unchecked.

The final program assessment phase delivers a definitive institutional assessment. The wellness platform scored a 2 out of 19 indicators on the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS), falling substantially below the occupational health intervention average of 5.8 and far underneath theory-grounded benchmarks of 10 to 14. Even the program's positive indicators reflect incidental alignment rather than intentional, theory-driven design. Most alarmingly, the data show that while internal capability for a superior strategy exists, deep structural inertia blocks its implementation. The campus administrator who successfully applied behavioral change theory to propose performance-integrated wellness goals and satellite-differentiated programming remains completely stymied by a lack of operational accountability. Thus, the exact organizational conditions producing staff frustration actively prevent its programmatic remedy. The institution fundamentally lacks not only an intervention designed to target the structural roots of attrition, but also an administrative feedback loop sensitive enough to detect peripheral need frustration and trigger a corrective response. The *Integrated Triad for Systemic Change*, proposed in the following section, is designed to close that precise gap.

Synthesized Conclusion

The convergence of evidence across three methodologically distinct research phases reveals a single, undeniable institutional reality: administrative staff turnover at this university constitutes a structural problem misdiagnosed and treated as an individual pathology. The initial qualitative phase identified the systemic mechanisms, asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, through which satellite campus structures simultaneously frustrate basic psychological needs and erode the supportive conditions necessary for sustained motivation. The subsequent quantitative phase established the system-wide scope of these

mechanisms, proving that need satisfaction and need frustration operate as distinct, parallel psychological pathways, with overall need satisfaction ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration, $\Delta R^2 = .061$) and career goal stagnation ($r = .68$) emerging as the dominant statistical predictors of employee attrition. Finally, the program assessment phase demonstrated the absolute failure of the institution's primary retention-adjacent initiative to engage these underlying drivers (scoring just 2 out of 19 on the TCS), while revealing that identical structural conditions actively block an effective, localized organizational response.

Ultimately, the qualitative *why* discovered in the initial phase provides a rich contextual explanation for the quantitative *what* measured in the subsequent survey phase. Concurrently, the programmatic *how* evaluated in the final phase reveals why these turnover vulnerabilities persist despite ongoing institutional investments. Collectively, these integrated empirical streams establish what no single method could discover in isolation: retaining administrative staff, particularly within geographically distributed satellite environments, demands an end to individualistic wellness applications, standard managerial training modules, or superficial engagement surveys. Instead, it requires a fundamental structural redesign of the institution toward self-determination-derived psychological conditions that enable and sustain intrinsic human motivation. The theoretical framework and actionable administrative recommendations for that structural reorientation follow.

Theoretical Contributions

Defining the Dual-Process: Need Satisfaction vs. Need Frustration

Central to this dissertation’s theoretical contribution is an empirically grounded extension of the dual-process framework within Self-Determination Theory (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013).

Within this paradigm, need satisfaction refers to the vital presence of psychological nutriments, specifically autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which support an individual's optimal functioning and self-determined motivation. Conversely, need frustration denotes more than merely the absence of these supportive experiences; it represents their active, structural thwarting within organizational contexts, a destructive process that yields far more detrimental motivational outcomes than low need satisfaction alone.

While this conceptual distinction is well established in general SDT scholarship, this dissertation extends it in two theoretically significant ways. First, the quantitative survey phase demonstrates dual-process differentiation within a critically understudied population of higher education administrative staff. Psychometric modeling revealed that basic psychological need frustration accounted for significant incremental variance in employee turnover intention beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). Parallel mediation analyses further indicated that while both need satisfaction and need frustration significantly transmitted the toxic effects of organizational stressors on turnover intention, the indirect pathways operating through need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models. These significant contrast effects provide empirical proof that basic need frustration serves as the dominant psychological catalyst underlying the turnover process in this administrative context.

Second, the empirical findings extracted from the satellite campus environments during the initial qualitative phase expose an overlooked structural mechanism through which systemic marginalization and organizational invisibility undermine basic need experiences. Rather than solely reflecting active, top-down controlling supervisory practices, psychological need frustration in geographically distributed institutional settings can also arise through passive systemic neglect and peripheral positioning. This insight effectively extends contemporary SDT

applications out of bounded team environments and into complex, multi-campus macro-organizational structures.

For satellite campus administrators, this dual organizational context fundamentally shapes what this study defines as the *Competence Paradox*: a structural friction wherein individuals experience high levels of localized role competence while simultaneously perceiving that centralized institutional designs actively obstruct the development, expansion, and realization of that competence. By identifying need frustration as the primary driver of administrative attrition, operating across both active and structural forms of systemic constraint, this dissertation shifts the field's focus away from merely enhancing positive workplace experiences. Instead, it demands that leadership confront and remediate the underlying organizational conditions that actively undermine basic human psychological needs.

Extending SDT to Peripheral Organizational Units: Three Emergent Constructs

Beyond the practical applications of the research, this multi-phase inquiry makes a distinct conceptual contribution to Self-Determination Theory's organizational framework by isolating three emergent constructs. These constructs describe exactly how psychological need frustration operates within peripheral organizational units. Crucially, these localized dynamics represent structural phenomena that standardized SDT psychometric instruments are not designed to detect, and which existing organizational research has yet to differentiate.

The first construct, *asymmetric power dynamics*, defines the active mechanism of basic psychological need frustration within multi-campus systems. When absolute decision-making authority over work arrangements, resource allocation, and organizational restructuring is concentrated exclusively at an institutional center, satellite campus staff are systematically denied the very conditions necessary for sustained motivation. This imbalance directly frustrates

employee need satisfaction, a reality verified by its dominant negative statistical relationship with retention ($r = -.603$), while simultaneously cultivating a climate of forced generalism that forecloses competence and leaves peripheral branches entirely invisible during decisions that shape their daily operations.

The second construct, *forced generalism*, illustrates how asymmetric power dynamics and benign neglect converge at the role level to manifest as the *Competence Paradox*. When peripheral staff must absorb constantly expanding responsibilities across disparate functional areas without the corresponding authority, staffing redundancy, or resource support required to make such breadth sustainable, they develop genuine immediate task proficiency while simultaneously experiencing the systematic foreclosure of their professional trajectory. This mechanism explains the sharp divergence uncovered between the BPNSFS competence subscale, which merely measures whether an employee feels capable in their immediate daily tasks, and the career stagnation metrics, which evaluate whether that capability is translating into meaningful professional advancement. This empirical divergence constitutes one of the most compelling pieces of cross-method triangulation within the entire case study.

The third construct, *benign neglect*, describes the passive mechanism of need frustration that asymmetric power dynamics alone fails to capture. Where asymmetric power operates through the deliberate, top-down concentration of executive authority, benign neglect functions through systemic institutional inattention. In this dynamic, the unique operational realities of satellite campuses are not actively suppressed; rather, they are simply overlooked. This passive mechanism produces an acute state of organizational invisibility, inflicting psychological need frustration through a form of withheld institutional responsiveness that standard need satisfaction metrics are fundamentally blind to.

Together, these three constructs define the satellite campus administrative experience in ways that standardized, context-blind psychometric tools cannot capture. They extend Self-Determination Theory's organizational framework by mapping the precise structural mechanisms of need frustration unique to peripheral institutional units. Furthermore, they provide a rigorous conceptual foundation for the future development of context-specific measurement scales in multi-campus retention research. Ultimately, these constructs establish that basic psychological need frustration in geographically distributed systems is not simply a more intense iteration of the stressors documented in centralized workplaces; rather, it is a qualitatively distinct organizational phenomenon produced by the toxic intersection of geographic marginalization and administrative invisibility.

From Emergent Constructs to Systemic Logic

The three emergent constructs; asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, collectively represent the structural 'press' that defines the peripheral campus administrative experience. While these concepts originally crystallized from the initial qualitative inquiry, the subsequent quantitative phase confirmed their severe statistical scope and impact. Specifically, the psychometric data verified that the structural conditions mapped by these constructs directly drive employee turnover intentions, with need satisfaction demonstrating a dominant negative relationship ($r = -.603$) and lack of career goals emerging as the single strongest overall predictor of attrition ($r = .68$). Translating these environmental precursors into explicit Self-Determination Theory mechanisms is a prerequisite for generating systemic, prescriptive solutions.

Integrated Triad for Systemic Change

The *Integrated Triad for Systemic Change* translates the empirical findings of this case

study into an actionable, three-component framework designed to address basic psychological need frustration at the organizational level, rather than merely managing its symptoms at the individual level. These three components are engineered to operate as an integrated system rather than a linear sequence. Each element directly targets a distinct dimension of the psychological need frustration identified across the qualitative and quantitative research phases, while simultaneously reinforcing the others to cultivate organizational conditions that support sustainable employee motivation and long-term retention.

The first component, *Wellness as a Diagnostic Hub*, repositions the existing well-being platform from an isolated standalone benefit into an active organizational sensing mechanism. The evaluative phase established that the program currently functions merely as a thermometer, monitoring individual health behaviors through basic participation metrics and insurance claims data without generating the psychological need outcome data necessary to detect or respond to structural need frustration. Repositioning the university's existing data infrastructure (including platform participation rates, Employee Assistance Program utilization trends, and localized engagement metrics) as vital inputs for leadership decision-making would transform the platform. Rather than serving as a passive monitor of individual well-being, it becomes an active diagnostic tool capable of flagging at-risk teams and triggering targeted structural interventions. Crucially, this component requires no new institutional investment; instead, it demands a deliberate reorientation of data the university already collects.

The second component, *Structural Redesign*, directly targets the competence and autonomy frustration that the quantitative phase verified as the dominant statistical predictors of employee turnover intention. Within that psychometric analysis, a lack of career development emerged as the leading overall organizational stressor ($r = .68$), while basic need satisfaction

manifested as the strongest negative predictor of attrition (β = −.601 prior to controlling for need frustration), with overall need satisfaction showing the most severe correlation among primary study variables ($r = -.603$). By directly manipulating these specific variables, the proposed structural redesign shifts the university from a compliance-based administrative architecture to an autonomy-supportive one, systematically mitigating the structural pathways to employee departure.

The structural redesign accomplishes this through three concrete mechanisms: first, establishing clear, transparent promotion ladders tied to professional certifications to counteract the career goal stagnation produced by forced generalism; second, conducting competency-based role audits to re-align daily responsibilities with the operational authority and resource support necessary to develop genuine expertise; and third, implementing formal decentralization protocols that grant satellite campus administrators explicit discretion over routine operational decisions without requiring tedious, centralized main-campus approvals.

The third component, *Leadership Networks*, addresses the relatedness frustration and trust erosion that the qualitative and quantitative phases documented as accelerating employee motivational decline once autonomy and competence restrictions are established. This element involves implementing autonomy-supportive leadership workshops grounded explicitly in Self-Determination Theory principles, creating volitional goal-setting processes that afford administrative staff a meaningful voice in shaping their professional development trajectories, and constructing non-controlling feedback loops. These relational upgrades are specifically designed to rebuild the workplace trust and sense of belonging that were previously eroded by the asymmetric power dynamics characteristic of centralized campus governance.

The following Logic Mapping Chart (**Table 11**) bridges this operational gap. It

systematically aligns the lived experiences of staff captured during the qualitative phase with the empirical drivers of turnover verified in the quantitative phase, while identifying the specific institutional design failures exposed during the program assessment. This integrated mapping ensures that the subsequent Theory of Change is not a generic, individualistic wellness initiative, but a targeted organizational intervention engineered to dismantle the precise structural barriers hindering staff retention.

Table 11
Logic Mapping Chart

Empirical Discovery (The "Why")	**Theoretical Mechanism (SDT)**	**ToC Strategic Intervention (The "How")**
Phase 1: Asymmetric Power (The "Oneness" mandate causing top-down control)	**Overall Need Frustration** (*r = .60; hierarchical regression* $\beta = .339$, $\Delta R^2 = .061$ *in Study 2*)	**Decentralized Governance:** Shift from "Behavioral Control" to "Local Agency" in satellite operations.
Phase 1: Forced Generalism (Role overload and lack of specialization)	**Competence Frustration** (*r = .68; career goal stagnation in Study 2*)	**Structural Specialization:** Redesigning job descriptions to prioritize professional mastery over "administrative catch-all" roles.
Phase 1: Benign Neglect (Feeling like a "second-class citizen" or outsider)	**Relatedness Frustration** (*Mediation path confirmed in Study 2*)	**Inclusive Integration:** Moving from "Social Wellness" to "Structural Inclusion" (e.g., satellite representation on central councils).
Phase 3: Theory Gap (TCS score of 2/19; focus on individual behavior)	**Mismatched Intervention** (Treating symptoms, not structural needs)	**Organizational Intervention:** Replacing individual-level wellness apps with institution-level autonomy-supportive leadership training.

Note: This logic mapping chart illustrates the sequential alignment of the dissertation's findings. It traces the transition from specific organizational stressors identified in the initial qualitative phase and statistically validated in the subsequent quantitative survey phase to the proposed

structural interventions. By identifying the specific psychological need frustrated by each environmental stressor, the chart provides an explicit theoretical justification for a prospective 'Theory of Change' that targets the root causes of administrative turnover rather than merely treating its behavioral symptoms.

Theory of Change

Based on the cross-phase integration illustrated in the Logic Mapping Matrix (**Table 11**), the following Theory of Change moves beyond the traditional individualistic focus of institutional wellness platforms to directly address the structural frustration of basic psychological needs. This model recognizes that the administrative attrition observed across the university system is not a collection of isolated personal choices, but a predictable reaction to an environment characterized by asymmetric power dynamics and forced generalism. By shifting the institution's focus from a mismatched behavioral platform to a systemic organizational redesign, this Theory of Change provides a clear framework for transitioning the administrative culture from top-down control to comprehensive autonomy support. The primary objective is to dismantle the structural 'thorns' that currently drive systemic need frustration, thereby allowing the university to establish a sustainable, psychologically nourishing operational model.

Problem Context and Long-Term Goal

The *Integrated Triad for Systemic Change* translates into a prospective, SDT-based Theory of Change that specifies how structural reform, leadership development, and diagnostic data can work in concert to shift the institution from a model that merely manages the consequences of need frustration to one that prevents its structural conditions from forming. This is a prospective logic model rather than an evaluated intervention; its projected pathways are firmly grounded in established SDT intervention research and in the specific empirical findings of this case study, though pilot implementation and longitudinal evaluation will remain necessary to definitively test its causal claims.

The model operates through three interconnected activity pathways, each targeting the specific need frustration mechanisms and need-supportive conditions this research identified as most consequential for administrative retention. The *Diagnostic Hub* pathway involves augmenting the wellness platform's existing participation and Employee Assistance Program (EAP) utilization data with validated BPNSFS subscale measurements administered quarterly. This generates campus-specific psychological need outcome data that transforms the platform from a passive wellness monitor into an active retention diagnostic capable of detecting both need frustration and diminished need satisfaction across diverse campus locations.

The *Structural Redesign* pathway deploys competency-based role audits, certification-linked promotion ladders, and formal decentralization protocols that grant satellite campus administrators explicit discretion over routine operational decisions. This pathway directly targets the severe erosion of overall need satisfaction ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration) and career goal stagnation ($r = .68$) verified in the quantitative phase as the dominant predictors of employee exit intent. Finally, the *Leadership Networks* pathway utilizes SDT-aligned supervision training, volitional goal-setting processes, and non-controlling feedback structures to directly dismantle the asymmetric power dynamics and benign neglect identified during the initial qualitative phase as the primary mechanisms through which centralized campus structures erode relatedness and accelerate employee motivational decline.

The projected outcome pathway unfolds across three distinct timeframes grounded in SDT intervention research documenting similar behavioral timelines (Wang et al., 2024). In the immediate term (0–3 months), implementation outputs include campus-specific BPNSFS baseline data establishing the psychological need profile of each location, the completion of SDT

supervision training among administrative leads, and departmental role audit data identifying primary skill gaps and authority constraints. These outputs signal to the workforce that structural change is actively underway rather than merely planned.

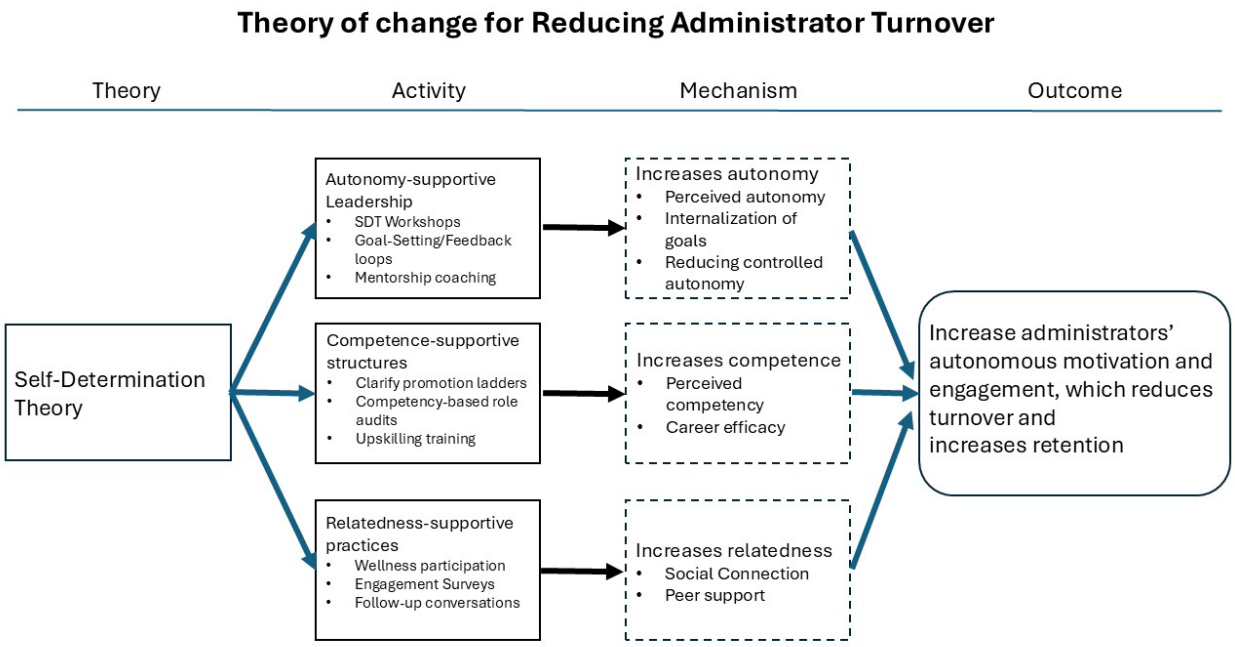
In the intermediate term (3–9 months), the model anticipates measurable increases in psychological need satisfaction scores and corresponding decreases in need frustration scores, alongside reductions in reported turnover intention, the critical psychological precursors to actual departure that the quantitative phase established as the most sensitive leading indicators of retention risk. In the long term (12 months and beyond), the model projects meaningful reductions in actual voluntary turnover. The specific magnitude of this reduction depends on the degree to which the structural redesign and leadership network components are successful in reducing the deficit in overall need satisfaction ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration) and career goal stagnation ($r = .68$) previously shown to be strongly associated with exit intentions. These long-term effects are expected to operate through organizational stressors that influence turnover via both need satisfaction and need frustration pathways; however, prior psychometric analyses indicate that need frustration exert consistently stronger indirect effects than need satisfaction across all models, reflecting a differential rather than equivalent mediation pathway.

These projected pathways rest on Self-Determination Theory's core proposition: when organizational environments actively fulfill the basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness, employee motivation shifts away from controlled compliance and toward autonomous, internalized commitment. This alignment fundamentally reduces the systemic conditions that make voluntary exit feel necessary and restorative. **Figure 4** illustrates this full logic model, beginning with Self-Determination Theory as the absolute theoretical

foundation, moving through the three active pathways of the Integrated Triad to the specific psychological need mechanisms each pathway targets, and concluding with the projected immediate, intermediate, and long-term retention outcomes the model is engineered to produce.

Figure 4

Self-Determination Theory-Based Logic Model for Administrative Retention



Note: This self-determination theory-based logic model illustrates the structural flow of the proposed organizational intervention. It traces the three primary activity pathways of the *Integrated Triad*, Wellness as a Diagnostic Hub, Structural Redesign, and Leadership Networks, mapping each pathway directly through its targeted psychological need mechanisms to its corresponding immediate, intermediate, and long-term retention outcomes.

Theoretical Rationale

Self-Determination Theory provides the explicit causal explanation linking the *Integrated Triad's* three activity pathways to the long-term retention outcomes projected by the logic model. The foundational causal mechanism driving this model is *internalization*. When organizational environments actively support autonomy, competence, and relatedness, employees progressively

internalize the intrinsic value and meaning of their work. This shift transitions personnel away from externally controlled motivation, compliance driven merely by transactional rewards or fear of consequence, and toward autonomous motivation, driven by a genuine identification with institutional goals (Gagné & Deci, 2005; Ryan & Deci, 2017). This internalized motivational state is strongly associated with lower voluntary turnover. Because departure decisions within this psychological state require overcoming a genuine sense of purpose and connection, employees are far less likely to leave than when operating in an environment that offers no intrinsic reason to stay.

The *Integrated Triad* is engineered to construct the precise organizational conditions under which this internalization becomes possible, accomplished by simultaneously dismantling the structural sources of need frustration and rebuilding the need-supportive conditions that sustain autonomous motivation. This represents the critical distinction between the *Integrated Triad* and generic employee engagement programming. Where standard engagement initiatives superficially add supportive perks without addressing the deeply embedded barriers that actively block internalization, the *Integrated Triad* treats both imperatives as equally necessary.

The quantitative survey phase confirmed that need frustration explains significant incremental variance in employee turnover intention over and above need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). This psychometric finding verifies that the two constructs are empirically distinct psychological mechanisms rather than inverse reflections of one another, providing the empirical warrant for targeting both simultaneously. Furthermore, parallel mediation analyses indicated that broad organizational stressors, specifically centralized control, foreclosed career development, and institutional invisibility, transmit their toxic influence on turnover intention through both need frustration and need satisfaction pathways. However, the indirect effects

operating via need frustration were consistently stronger across all models, indicating a differential rather than an equivalent mediation. The *Integrated Triad* is designed to address both pathways in concert: the Structural Redesign component removes the environmental barriers that produce active need frustration; the Leadership Networks component builds the autonomy-supportive climates that restore need satisfaction; and the Diagnostic Hub generates the continuous psychological need outcome data necessary to monitor whether both mechanisms are shifting in an optimal direction.

Within this framework, the three components of the *Integrated Triad* target internalization through distinct but mutually reinforcing pathways. The *Diagnostic Hub* establishes the data infrastructure necessary to detect severe need frustration before it reaches the critical threshold identified during the qualitative phase as producing total amotivation and the subsequent decision to leave. This predictive capability enables structural interventions to occur at the precise point where they can interrupt the turnover trajectory, rather than responding to attrition after a departure has occurred.

Concurrently, the *Structural Redesign* pathway directly remedies the forced generalism and career goal stagnation that the quantitative phase verified as the single strongest predictors of exit intent, effectively creating the conditions under which competence development and autonomous career motivation become organizationally viable rather than structurally foreclosed. Finally, the *Leadership Networks* component rebuilds the relational trust and institutional connections that systemic benign neglect steadily erodes, restoring the relatedness conditions under which employees experience their daily operations as part of a meaningful institutional community rather than as isolated performers of centrally determined tasks. Together, these three pathways are strategically designed to shift the motivational climate of satellite campus

administrative work away from an environment that makes voluntary departure feel necessary and restorative, the troubling reality documented in the initial qualitative phase, to an architecture that makes sustained engagement feel genuinely possible.

Implications and Conclusion

Implications for Policy

The convergence of findings across all three empirical phases points toward three critical structural policy modifications that institutions must prioritize. Each recommendation is grounded in specific empirical data points rather than generic retention clichés, reinforcing this case study's central thesis: administrative staff turnover is fundamentally an institutional design defect requiring explicit structural solutions.

First, geographically distributed multi-campus systems must establish formal decentralization policies that grant satellite campus administrators explicit authority over routine operational workflows, flexible scheduling arrangements, localized hiring, and parameter-bound budgeting. This structural layout should bypass tedious main-campus approval processes for matters that can be resolved locally. The quantitative phase identified the erosion of overall need satisfaction as the strongest predictor of employee retention ($r = -.603$; hierarchical regression $\beta = -.601$, accounting for an initial $\Delta R^2 = .351$ prior to introducing frustration effects), while the initial qualitative phase established centralized control as the most consistently cited catalyst of that frustration across all participant narratives. Policy-level decentralization represents the only systemic mechanism capable of addressing this deficit. The deep asymmetric power dynamics identified during the qualitative phase as constitutive of satellite campus governance simply cannot be dismantled through superficial supervisory training modules alone.

Second, institutions should mandate that well-being and employee retention initiatives

undergo formal, theory-based assessments prior to implementation and at regular evaluation intervals. The final evaluative phase of this inquiry established that a functionally mature, highly resourced wellness platform can score an underwhelming 2 out of 19 indicators of explicit theoretical grounding on the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS) while still maintaining strong superficial participation metrics. This disconnect proves that functional platform maturity and theoretical efficacy are not equivalent. Requiring a theory-based audit as an explicit condition of institutional investment, specifically utilizing validated metrics like the TCS with Self-Determination Theory as the evaluative baseline, would ensure that programs are engineered to target the precise psychological mechanisms driving attrition, rather than merely monitoring software participation as a proxy for retention impact.

Third, institutional human resources policy frameworks must explicitly distinguish between *wellness programming*, which supports individual health and lifestyle behaviors, and *retention programming*, which targets the organizational environments that actively frustrate the basic psychological needs essential for sustained motivation. The parallel mediation models verified in the quantitative phase established that organizational stressors transmit their toxic influence through both need frustration and need satisfaction as parallel but differential pathways. Crucially, because need frustration consistently exerts a stronger indirect influence on turnover intentions across all models, institutional retention policies must prioritize removing structural barriers while simultaneously cultivating need-supportive conditions.

Current policy frameworks treat wellness and retention as equivalent, a conflation that produces the flawed 'engagement-as-proxy-for-retention' logic exposed during the final programmatic evaluation phase. Explicitly separating these two functions within institutional policy will generate the operational space necessary to develop targeted retention initiatives that

engage structural conditions rather than individual symptoms. The integrated findings of this case study establish this policy-level distinction as an absolute prerequisite for achieving meaningful reductions in administrative staff turnover.

Implications for Practice

The most immediate practical implication of this dissertation is the systematic institutional diagnostic sequence that the multi-phase design makes possible. Institutions seeking to remediate administrative staff turnover, particularly within geographically distributed systems, can apply this research framework as a three-step organizational diagnostic. **First**, they can assess whether the specific structural conditions exposed during the qualitative phase, namely centralized governance, sole-practitioner staffing models, and institutional invisibility, are present in their own organizational contexts by utilizing the *Transferability of Constructs* framework. **Second**, they can deploy the BPNSFS alongside career goal stagnation metrics to measure the systemic prevalence and predictive weight of need frustration across all campus locations, explicitly distinguishing between minor need satisfaction deficits and the active need thwarting that the quantitative phase established as the far more potent driver of employee departure. **Third**, they can apply the Theory Coding Scheme (TCS) with Self-Determination Theory as the evaluative standard to audit whether existing well-being and retention programs are explicitly engineered to target the psychological conditions empirically shown to drive attrition. This three-step sequence effectively shifts institutional retention practice away from a reactive model that responds to departures after they occur, toward a diagnostic architecture that identifies and interrupts the structural conditions producing them.

Pilot implementation of the *Integrated Triad* is strongly recommended within a single administrative division at a satellite campus to establish rigorous pre- and post-intervention

baselines for employee turnover intentions, basic need satisfaction scores, need frustration metrics, and general engagement data. The wellness platform's existing data infrastructure can be leveraged to provide ongoing participation rates and EAP utilization trends while human resources analytics track concrete retention outcomes. A structured six-month evaluation cycle would generate sufficient empirical evidence to assess whether the *Integrated Triad* produces measurable, positive shifts in the exact SDT constructs verified in the quantitative phase as primary turnover predictors, before scaling the intervention to additional departments or campus locations.

Critically, this evaluation must measure basic need frustration and need satisfaction concurrently, rather than relying on standard engagement metrics as a proxy. The parallel mediation analyses conducted in the quantitative phase indicated that while both constructs significantly mediate the relationship between organizational stressors and exit intent, the indirect effects operating via need frustration were consistently and significantly stronger across all models. Furthermore, the unique incremental variance finding ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$) provides definitive proof that basic need frustration explains unique variance in turnover intention beyond need satisfaction. This empirical reality reinforces the operational necessity to assess both psychological constructs independently, rather than treating either as an inverse reflection or proxy for the other.

The transferability of the *Integrated Triad* to alternative institutional contexts requires a preliminary structural assessment rather than a uniform, context-blind implementation. This framework was developed in direct response to a highly specific constellation of organizational factors, geographic distance from an institutional center, sole-practitioner campus staffing, highly centralized governance models, and severely limited career advancement pathways, which

define the structural profile within which the three emergent constructs are most analytically powerful. Practitioners should utilize the *Transferability of Constructs* framework generated in the qualitative phase to evaluate which *Integrated Triad* components are most applicable to their localized institutional architecture. Finally, organizations adopting this framework should integrate the Theory Coding Scheme as an ongoing audit tool. This continuous evaluation ensures that programmatic components maintain an explicit, intentional theoretical alignment with SDT principles as they evolve over time, systematically preventing the drift toward implicit, atheoretical designs identified during the program evaluation phase as the primary structural limitation of the university's current well-being strategy.

Implications for Research

The multi-phase sequential design of this dissertation opens several vital lines of future inquiry that no single methodological step could have generated independently. These research implications are systematically organized around three distinct operational levels: measurement development, design replication and extension, and theoretical extension.

Measurement Development. The three emergent constructs identified during the initial qualitative phase; asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect, currently exist as theoretically grounded qualitative frameworks without validated quantitative measurement instruments. The null campus comparison finding in the subsequent quantitative phase demonstrated that standardized Self-Determination Theory instruments, specifically the BPNSFS, are not sufficiently sensitive to detect the satellite-specific need thwarting mechanisms these constructs describe. This occurs because satellite staff often normalize their structural conditions, responding similarly to main-campus peers on aggregate, broad-spectrum measures.

Future research should focus on developing and validating context-specific scales capable

of measuring asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect as distinct psychometric constructs in multi-campus administrative staff populations. Generating such instruments would move administrative retention research beyond composite need frustration scores and toward the specific structural mechanisms most consequential for peripheral organizational units, producing a level of measurement precision that neither the BPNSFS alone nor satisfaction-only instruments can achieve.

Design Replication and Extension. Several design-level extensions would significantly strengthen and generalize the findings this case study established within a single R1 institutional pair. First, multi-site qualitative studies across diverse satellite campus networks would test the transferability of the three emergent constructs—particularly benign neglect and asymmetric power dynamics—and determine whether these patterns are unique to flagship research universities or common across other institutional types, including community colleges, regional universities, and private institutions with different governance structures.

Second, longitudinal designs tracking active satellite campus staff over 12 to 18 months would clarify the exact temporal relationships between basic need frustration, need satisfaction, and actual turnover behavior rather than mere turnover intention. This would move the literature beyond the cross-sectional snapshot produced in the quantitative phase, establishing whether the dual-process pathways documented here remain stable predictors of departure over time.

Third, more balanced campus subgroup designs, featuring a satellite campus sample size of $N = 30$ per location across multiple institutions, would provide sufficient statistical power to detect small effect size differences between campus environments. This would directly address the primary sample constraint of the quantitative phase's campus comparison analyses, where the minimum detectable effect size was restricted to $d = .41$ given the localized satellite subgroup of

$N = 40$.

Theoretical Extension. The verified dual-pathway mediation findings indicate that basic need frustration exerts significantly stronger indirect effects on exit intent than need satisfaction across all four organizational stressor models, suggesting a consistent pattern of differential mediation rather than functional equivalence. This raises a theoretically critical question that a single cross-sectional survey phase cannot fully resolve: whether the relative strength of these pathways varies across different levels of need frustration severity.

Future research should examine whether need frustration becomes increasingly dominant as individuals progress along a motivational decline trajectory, such as that suggested by the qualitative phase's narrative accounts of amotivation-like states among former satellite campus staff. Specifically, it would be highly valuable to test whether need frustration exerts a relatively greater mediating influence among individuals closer to behavioral withdrawal or active disengagement, compared to those experiencing earlier stages of environmental, need-based strain. Such work would clarify whether the observed pattern reflects a stable organizational process or a severity-dependent mechanism in which psychological need frustration becomes increasingly central as structural thwarting intensifies.

Additionally, the gap between practitioner theoretical knowledge and institutional program documentation identified during the final evaluative phase represents an underexplored implementation science question. The research documented an administrator who brought explicit behavior-change theory to his work but was fundamentally unable to institutionalize it within formal program design due to absent accountability structures and systemic leadership friction. Future research should examine the precise organizational conditions that enable or prevent the translation of latent practitioner theoretical knowledge into formal, documented

program design within higher education wellness contexts. Advancing this line of inquiry would enrich both implementation science literature and the practical development of theory-grounded retention programming across multi-campus systems.

Finally, future Self-Determination Theory organizational research in higher education must prioritize the concurrent measurement of both basic need frustration and need satisfaction using comprehensive instruments like the BPNSFS, rather than relying on satisfaction-only scales. The quantitative phase of this dissertation demonstrated that basic need frustration explains significant unique incremental variance in employee turnover intention beyond need satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$). This psychometric validation confirms that the two constructs are empirically distinct, and that measuring satisfaction alone systematically underestimates institutional retention risk by completely missing the active, structural thwarting component. Establishing this rigorous measurement standard across higher education administrative staff research will enable cumulative evidence-building regarding dual-process dynamics that the existing literature, currently dominated by satisfaction-only frameworks, cannot produce.

Conclusion

Administrative staff turnover at this institution is not a problem of individual motivation, localized managerial failure, or programmatic inadequacy. It is a structural problem, one actively produced by institutional designs that concentrate authority at the center, render peripheral staff organizationally invisible, and deliver retention responses calibrated to individual wellness rather than the organizational conditions driving departure. While these conditions are felt most acutely at the 'operational frontier' of the satellite campus, the empirical evidence confirms they are systemic pathologies embedded deep within the institution’s centralized logic.

This dissertation has named the explicit mechanisms through which that structural

problem operates: asymmetric power dynamics that strip staff of professional agency, benign neglect that produces need frustration through institutional inattention, and forced generalism that forecloses professional trajectory while preserving daily task proficiency. The quantitative survey phase established the overwhelming empirical weight of these mechanisms: the psychological need processes they disrupt—comprising both the active frustration and the diminished satisfaction of autonomy, competence, and relatedness, account for 46.1% of the total variance in employee turnover intention among the 447 responding staff members.

Critically, basic need satisfaction emerged as a strong negative predictor of turnover intention in hierarchical regression models ($\beta = -.601$ prior to controlling for need frustration), with overall need satisfaction demonstrating the strongest correlation among primary study variables ($r = -.603$). Concurrently, basic need frustration explained significant unique incremental variance beyond satisfaction ($\Delta R^2 = .061$, $p < .001$), while a lack of career goals manifested as the leading overall organizational stressor ($r = .68$). Parallel mediation analyses demonstrated that these relationships operated through parallel but differential psychological pathways. Within these models, need frustration exerted consistently stronger indirect effects than need satisfaction across all organizational stressors, a difference confirmed by significant statistical contrast tests.

These findings are entirely consistent with the interpretation that institutional efforts toward centralized uniformity may contribute directly to widespread experiences of psychological need frustration across the university system. Finally, the evaluative data suggests that the institution's current response framework is not explicitly engineered to address these underlying psychological mechanisms. Rather, the heavy organizational emphasis on individual-level wellness interventions may simply reflect the same centralized structural conditions that

give rise to the problem it seeks to mitigate.

What this dissertation contributes that did not exist before it is a theoretically grounded, empirically tested, and practically actionable framework for understanding and addressing administrative staff turnover in geographically distributed higher education institutions. The three emergent constructs generated here extend Self-Determination Theory's organizational framework into peripheral institutional contexts it has not previously theorized.

The integrated, multi-phase diagnostic sequence, identifying structural mechanisms qualitatively, establishing their prevalence and predictive weight quantitatively, and evaluating the institutional response against an explicit theoretical standard, provides a highly replicable research and practice model for institutions seeking to pivot from reactive retention management to proactive structural retention design. Furthermore, the *Integrated Triad for Systemic Change* translates these contributions into specific, empirically grounded recommendations for governance policy, workflow design, and leadership networks that aggressively target the structural conditions driving employee departure rather than merely managing their consequences.

Much remains to be done. The emergent constructs of asymmetric power dynamics, forced generalism, and benign neglect require the creation of validated measurement instruments capable of detecting satellite-specific need thwarting in contexts where standardized surveys consistently smooth it over. The *Integrated Triad* requires longitudinal evaluation to establish whether structural intervention successfully interrupts the turnover trajectory before it reaches the threshold of severe amotivation identified during the qualitative phase as the point at which departure becomes restorative. And this multi-phase sequential design requires multi-site replication to determine whether the organizational patterns documented here reflect conditions

specific to this R1 institution or represent structural features of peripheral organizational units across higher education more broadly.

These are not limitations of this dissertation. They are the robust research agenda it makes possible. The administrative professionals who sustain the daily operations of higher education institutions, who manage financial aid, coordinate academic services, advise students, and maintain the complex infrastructure that makes faculty teaching and student learning possible, have been largely invisible in the retention literature that purports to address workforce stability in academia. This dissertation has made them visible, named the structural conditions that drive them away, and proposed a theoretically grounded framework for building the institutional environments in which they can stay. That is what this work is for.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY 1 MATERIALS

IRB Approval for Study 1

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Initial Submission – Exempt from IRB Review – AP01

Date: March 07, 2025 **IRB#:** 18244

Principal Investigator: Phil Salon

Approval Date: 03/06/2025

Exempt Category: 2

Study Title: Understanding voluntary administrative staff turnover at higher education satellite campuses post-covid: A qualitative study through self-determination theory.

On behalf of the Institutional Review Board (IRB), I have reviewed the above-referenced research study and determined that it meets the criteria for exemption from IRB review. To view the documents approved for this submission, open this study from the *My Studies* option, go to *Submission History*, go to *Completed Submissions* tab and then click the *Details* icon.

As principal investigator of this research study, you are responsible to:

- Conduct the research study in a manner consistent with the requirements of the IRB and federal regulations 45 CFR 46.
- Request approval from the IRB prior to implementing any/all modifications as changes could affect the exempt status determination.
- Maintain accurate and complete study records for evaluation by the HRPP Quality Improvement Program and, if applicable, inspection by regulatory agencies and/or the study sponsor.
- Notify the IRB at the completion of the project.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the IRB @ 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu.

Cordially,

Kendra Williams-Diehm, Ph.D.
Vice Chair, Institutional Review Board

Consent to Participate in Research

Oral Consent to Participate in Research
University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Phil Salon from the OU-Tulsa's College of Education, and I invite you to participate in my research entitled Understanding Administrative Staff Turnover at Satellite Campuses: A Self-Determination Theory Approach. This research is being conducted at OU-Tulsa. You were selected as a possible participant because you were an administrative staff employee at a higher education satellite campus that recently left. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to understand why administrative staff voluntary leave positions in higher education satellite campuses particularly in the post-covid timeframe.

How many participants will be in this research? About 10 people will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, I will use zoom to record audio and video during the interview. You will be asked a few questions regarding your time at work and why you left.

How long will this take? Your participation will take 30-45 minutes.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate? The following are possible risks of participating in this research study.

Questions that could be emotionally distressing: We will ask you to answer questions that may make you distressed or trigger strong emotional reactions. If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to provide an answer, or you can stop our discussion or discontinue participation in the research. If the researcher sees signs that you are distressed, they will pause the discussion and ask if you would like to continue.

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.

What are the benefits if I participate? N/A

Will I be compensated for participating? You are not reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information? There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose

IRB NUMBER: 18244
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 03/0

benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you agree to be identified. Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree for data records to include my identifiable information. ___Yes ___ No

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to have my name reported with quoted material. ___Yes ___ No

I agree for my research data to be archived for scholarly and public access. ___Yes ___No

What will happen to my data in the future? We will not share your data or use it in future research.

Audio Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. If you do not agree to audio-recording, you cannot participate in this research.

I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

Video Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses interviews may be recorded on a video recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording. If you do not agree to video-recording, you cannot participate in this research. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording. ___ Yes ___ No

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ___Yes ___ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, contact me at psalon@ou.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Elizabeth Zumpe, elizabeth.a.zumpe-1@ou.edu.

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___ No

Do you agree for your data to be archived for scholarly and public access? ___Yes ___ No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___No



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Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____ (note response)

Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy: _____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process: _____

Signature of the Researcher: _____

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Interview Protocol

Project: Understanding voluntary administrative staff turnover at higher education satellite campuses post-covid: A qualitative study through self-determination theory.

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee ID:

Interview Script:

Thank you for participating in this research study about administrative staff turnover on higher education satellite campuses. This interview is an opportunity for you to share your thoughts and experiences about your previous employment. This should take approximately 30-45 minutes. I am going to ask you a series of questions and I will be recording this zoom session with your consent. Please answer to the best of your ability and note that this is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions and can end the interview at any time. I may follow up later for clarification after reviewing the data or analysis.

This recording will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Your personal information as well as anything you share will be de-identified in any publications and if quoted, your name will not be used.

Before we begin:

1. Do you have any questions for me before we start? ___Yes or ___No
2. Do you agree to voluntarily participate in this research? ___Yes or ___No (Stop here)
3. Do I have your consent to begin recording? ___Yes or ___No

Begin with the interview questions:

Note that questions that start with # are used as probing questions within the related section.

Background:

1. Can you briefly describe your role prior to leaving?
2. How long did you work in this position?

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3. #What were your primary responsibilities?
4. #What were, if there were any, alternate duties?

Reasons for quitting:

5. What were the main factors that influenced your decision to leave?
6. How did these factors develop over time?
7. #Were there specific events that contributed to your decision?
8. #How did compensation/benefits or career advancement impact your decision?
9. #How did work/life balance affect your thoughts regarding leaving?

Autonomy (Sense of control and choice in work):

10. Were you able to make your own decisions about how to perform your tasks, or were there strict guidelines you had to follow?
11. Were there any leadership or management challenges that contributed to your decision?
12. #Can you describe the level of independence you had in making decisions?
13. #Have you ever felt micromanaged?
14. #Are you allowed to work on your own?

Competence (Feeling effective and capable in work):

15. What were challenges that were the result of either the job or the resources available?
16. #How were you trained for your position?
17. How were professional development opportunities made available for you?

Relatedness (Connection and relationships at work):

18. How would you describe your relationship with colleagues at both campuses?
19. How did geographical distance affect collaboration?
20. #Have you felt part of your department?
21. #Have you ever felt ignored or isolated?

Satellite campus

22. How did being at a satellite campus impact your ability to perform at your job?
23. What unique situations did you face while working at a satellite campus?

*General Probing Questions

- #Could you elaborate on that point?
- #Can you provide a specific example?
- #How did that make you feel?
- #What impact did that have on your work?

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– #How did that compare to your expectations?

Conclusion

24. Was there anything else that contributed to your departure?
25. Do you have any questions for me?

Closing Remarks:

Thank you for your time! Your feedback is valuable and will help with my research involving Understanding voluntary administrative staff turnover at higher education satellite campuses post-covid.

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Table A1: Study 1 Codebook

Table A1.

Study 1 Codebook

Sample Deductive Codes	Definition
choice	an employee's ability to select or influence aspects of their job
open expression	allowing employees to freely share their thoughts, ideas, concerns, and opinions without fear of negative repercussions
have input	to provide your opinion, ideas, or suggestions on a particular topic or decision-making process
relationships	a connection where individuals actively listen, care for, and encourage each other's well-being
sense of community	a feeling of belonging, mattering, and shared purpose that people have with each other in a group
affinity with others	feeling a natural connection or sense of closeness with colleagues due to shared interests, values, experiences, or backgrounds, leading to easier collaboration and a stronger sense of belonging within the workplace
belief in capability	an individual's confidence in their ability to successfully perform their job tasks and achieve work goals
feedback on performance	being given praise, appreciation, or recognition for your actions, behaviors, or work performance
expertise valued/recognized	a specific skill or knowledge set within a professional field that an individual possesses and is acknowledged by colleagues, managers
workload	the amount of work to be done by someone
role conflict	a situation where an employee is faced with conflicting expectations or demands from different sources within their job, causing stress and difficulty
uncomfortable work environment	a workplace where employees feel intimidated, scared, or uncomfortable
achieving work goals	successfully completing specific, measurable tasks or objectives set within a professional setting
transparency	openly sharing information, decision-making processes, and accountability with employees
active listening	fully concentrating on and understanding what employees are saying by paying close attention to their verbal and nonverbal cues, responding thoughtfully
effective communication	conveying information, ideas, and vision to employees with clarity, purpose, and understanding
pay	the total amount of money and benefits an employee receives in exchange for their work

position / status	a role or function that an employee has at a company

Sample Inductive Codes	Definition	Sample Excerpt
choice	the ability to select which specific activity or job to work on from a range of available options	"I grew bored of my job, really, really bored. I didn't have enough to do."
sense of community	a feeling of belonging, mattering, and shared purpose that people have with each other in a group	"We did our jobs, but we would all meet for lunch at the table and just visit and talk about the weekend "
relationships	a connection where individuals actively listen, care for, and encourage each other's well-being	"..I love the people I work with. I adore the people I work with "
not capable	an employee lacks the necessary skills, knowledge, or abilities to successfully perform the required tasks of their job	"demoting me and cutting my pay "
unappreciated	feeling like your contributions, hard work, and achievements are not recognized or valued by your colleagues or managers	"I was not wanted by the university"
feedback on performance	being given praise, appreciation, or recognition for your actions, behaviors, or work performance	". And we're operating for months and months under the assumption that it goes this way and really they changed it to go this way, but they didn't tell us "
feelings toward work	Emotional responses toward work	can refer to being frustrated or bored
negative attitude	a consistent mindset where an employee displays pessimism, negativity, complaining, criticism towards colleagues	"So I just was very bored, very frustrated with the way things were going "
uncomfortable workplace	a workplace where employees feel intimidated, scared, or uncomfortable	“There were no windows. We asked to be moved to windows, and we were told no. And I get why we weren't there was no flexibility in it“
lack of responsibility	an employee consistently fails to take ownership of their assigned tasks, neglecting duties, missing deadlines, avoiding accountability for mistakes, and generally not	"The hot potato toss of no one taking responsibility for making the decisions "

	fulfilling their work obligations, often by blaming others or making excuses instead of actively addressing issues	
transparency	openly sharing information, decision-making processes, and accountability with employees	"..no one taking responsibility for making the decision"
inadequate pay	the total amount of money and benefits an employee receives in exchange for their work	"The pay was garbage"
position	a role or function that an employee has at a company	"supervisor could have classified our jobs differently for more pay, and I think they chose not to"
flexibility	ability to adapt	"I did have the opportunity to flex my schedule and, um, like, try to retain as much balance of my own life as I could "

Sample Dedoose Codes	Definition	Sample Quote
Autonomy	The need to feel a sense of volition and willingness in one's actions. opportunity to make choices, set goals, and engage in tasks without external pressure	"The hot potato toss of no one taking responsibility for making the decisions"
Competence	The need to feel effective, capable, and able to achieve goals. sense of solving problems and gaining mastery over skills	"I'm like, I didn't even know I was supposed to be doing that. Yeah, so my training was not great in that respect."
Relatedness	The need to feel connected to others and experience a sense of belonging within a group or community	"I liked the people I was engaged with on a daily basis."
Leadership	styles, behaviors, accountability, responsibility, employee development	"They don't care about us at all. And I think I think that if they could have just said, they would have."
Growth and Advancement	career progression, skill development, recognition and feedback, mentorship and guidance, job enrichment	"There really isn't a lot of upward mobility within our campus structure."

Compensation	concerns about salary, benefits, or perceptions of pay	“You know, I could have been better taken care of. I could have been compensated better. And I just wasn't.”

APPENDIX B: STUDY 2 MATERIALS

IRB Approval for Study 2

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Study Modification – Expedited Review – AP0

Date: July 21, 2025 **IRB#:** 18244

Principal Investigator: Phil Salon **Reference No: 778467**

Study Title: Understanding voluntary administrative staff turnover at higher education satellite campuses post-covid: A qualitative study through self-determination theory.

Approval Date: 07/21/2025

Modification Description: Adding online survey with up to 500 current university admin staff

The review and approval of this submission is based on the determination that the study, as amended, will continue to be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46.

To view the approved documents for this submission, open this study from the My Studies option, go to Submission History, go to Completed Submissions tab and then click the Details icon.

If the consent form(s) were revised as a part of this modification, discontinue use of all previous versions of the consent form.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the HRPP office at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu. The HRPP Administrator assigned for this submission: Kat L Braswell.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Consent to Participate in Research / Survey instrument (full scales used)

BPNSFS Survey

Start of Block: Consent

Consent to Participate in Research
University of Oklahoma Guidance I am Phil Salon, a graduate student in Educational Leadership and Policy Studies at the University of Oklahoma. I are administering a survey to understand administrative intent to turnover at a higher education campus through the lens of the Self-Determination Theory. You were selected to participate because you are an administrator at the University of Oklahoma. Participation is voluntary. If you agree to participate, you will complete a short survey that lasts between 15-20 minutes. Your identity will remain anonymous. There is no information that will make it possible to identify you. Data will be stored securely and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to records. Data are collected via an online platform not hosted by OU that has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. Your data will not be shared or used in future research projects. In the event data are accidentally released, deductive re-identification might be a potential risk. If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, contact me at psalon@ou.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Elizabeth Zumpe, elizabeth.a.zumpe-1@ou.edu. You can also contact the University of Oklahoma - Norman Campus Institutional Review Board at 405-325-8110 or irg@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints. By providing information to the researchers, I am agreeing to participate.

Consent Question Do you agree to participate in this research?

- ○ Yes (1)
- ○ No (2)

Skip To: End of Survey If Do you agree to participate in this research? = No

End of Block: Consent

Start of Block: Autonomy



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Q1 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel I have a choice in what I do at work. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel that the decisions I make at work reflect what I really want. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Most of the things I do at work, I do because I feel that I have to. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
My daily activities at work feel like a continuous line of duties. (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Autonomy

Start of Block: Competence

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Q2 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel confident that I can do things well at work. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel capable in doing what I do at work. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel competent in reaching my goals at work. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel that the relations I have at work are only superficial. (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Competence

Start of Block: Relatedness

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Q3 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel connected to the people at work who care about me and whom I care about. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel closely connected to other people who are important to me at work. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I seriously doubt whether I can do things well at work. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel insecure about my abilities at work. (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Relatedness

Start of Block: Disengagement/Burnout

Q4 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
At work, time goes by very slowly. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel bored at my job. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
I feel used up at the end of the workday. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
I have experienced feelings of burnout as a result of my job demands. (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Disengagement/Burnout

Start of Block: Ineffective Leadership

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Q5 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** about your supervisor with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
Your supervisor fails to interfere until problems become serious (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Your supervisor avoids getting involved when important issues arise (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Your supervisor is absent when needed (3)	○	○	○	○	○
Your supervisor waits for things to go wrong before taking action (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Ineffective Leadership

Start of Block: Lack of growth and advancement

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Q6 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
My present job is not relevant to my career goals and vocational growth. (1)	○	○	○	○	○
My present job does not provide me with good opportunities to realize my career goals. (2)	○	○	○	○	○
My present job does not encourage me to continuously gain new and job-related skills. (3)	○	○	○	○	○
My present job does not help me to continuously improve my professional capabilities (4)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Lack of growth and advancement

Start of Block: Work-Life Balance Issues

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Q7 Please indicate the extent to which you **Agree** or **Disagree** with the statements below.

	Strongly Disagree (1)	Disagree (2)	Somewhat Agree (3)	Agree (4)	Strongly Agree (5)
I feel frustrated by not having the option to work remotely or in a hybrid mode. (5)	○	○	○	○	○
I have to stay past my normal work hours to complete my assigned tasks. (6)	○	○	○	○	○
My workload is not manageable and negatively impacts my well-being. (7)	○	○	○	○	○
The policies and culture at my campus interfere with my ability to maintain a healthy work-life balance (8)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Work-Life Balance Issues

Start of Block: Turnover Intentions

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Q8 Please rate how frequently each of the following statements applies to you

	Never (25)	Rarely (26)	Sometimes (27)	Often (28)	Very Often (29)
How often have you considered leaving your job? (1)	○	○	○	○	○
How satisfying is your job in fulfilling your personal needs? (2)	○	○	○	○	○
How often are you frustrated when not given the opportunity at work to achieve your personal work-related goals? (3)	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you dream about getting another job that will better suit your personal needs? (4)	○	○	○	○	○
How likely are you to accept another job at the same compensation level should it be offered to you? (5)	○	○	○	○	○
How often do you look forward to another day at work? (6)	○	○	○	○	○

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End of Block: Turnover Intentions

Start of Block: Human Resources Staff Retention Programs

Q9 What type of human resource retention program do you participate in?

- ☐ Livewell (5)
- ☐ Employee Assistance Program (EAP) (6)
- ☐ Lead Sooner (7)
- ☐ Other (4) _____

Q10 On average, how many hours per month do you spend on these programs?

- ○ None (1)
- ○ Less than 1 hour (2)
- ○ 1-3 hours (3)
- ○ 4-6 hours (4)
- ○ More than 6 hours (5)

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Q11 To what extent have these programs contributed to your work?

	Strongly Disagree (6)	Disagree (7)	Somewhat Agree (8)	Agree (9)	Strongly Agree (10)
Participation in the program has helped you feel more autonomous (1)	○	○	○	○	○
Participation in the program has helped you grow professionally (2)	○	○	○	○	○
Participation in the program has helped you feel more connected to others (3)	○	○	○	○	○

End of Block: Human Resources Staff Retention Programs

Start of Block: Demographics

Q11 What is your gender?

- ○ Male (1)
- ○ Female (2)
- ○ Non-binary / third gender (3)
- ○ Prefer not to say (4)

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Q12 What is your age?

- ○ 18-24 years (1)
- ○ 25-40 years (2)
- ○ 41-56 years (3)
- ○ 57 years or more (4)
- ○ Prefer not to say (5)

Q13 What is your highest level of education?

- ○ High School (1)
- ○ Associate's Degree (2)
- ○ Bachelor's Degree (3)
- ○ Master's Degree (4)
- ○ Doctorate Degree (5)
- ○ Prefer not to say (6)

Q14 What is your current position?

_____

_____

_____

_____

_____

Q15 What is the length of time with your current position?

- ○ Less than 1 year (1)
- ○ 1-4 years (2)
- ○ 5-10 years (3)
- ○ 10-15 years (4)
- ○ 15-20 years (5)
- ○ 20+ years (6)

End of Block: Demographics

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Supplementary Measurement Validation and Confirmatory Factor Analyses

To preserve the narrative focus of the primary text, the granular multidimensional structural evaluations of the survey instruments are detailed herein. All supplementary confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) were executed utilizing Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS) estimation within Jamovi, an approach specifically optimized for handling ordinal, Likert-scale data structures (Muthén, 1984; Flora & Curran, 2004). Model fit thresholds were evaluated against the rigorous criteria established by Hu and Bentler (1999).

Seven-Factor Subscale Measurement Model

A seven-factor CFA was conducted using the full analytic sample ($N = 451$) to verify the psychometric independence of the individual basic psychological need subscales alongside the target outcome variable. Separate latent factors were specified for autonomy satisfaction, autonomy frustration, competence satisfaction, competence frustration, relatedness satisfaction, relatedness frustration, and turnover intention.

During the iterative model refinement process, two turnover intention indicators were removed on both theoretical and statistical grounds to establish a highly parsimonious outcome measure, leaving two final indicators. Consistent with the conceptual proximity of belongingness deficits and institutional exit behaviors described in the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) literature (Vansteenkiste & Ryan, 2013), a single correlated residual was permitted between the first relatedness frustration indicator and the second turnover intention indicator.

The final seven-factor subscale model demonstrated excellent fit to the empirical data: $\chi^2(55) = 71.9$, $p = .062$; CFI = .995; TLI = .991; RMSEA = .026 [.004, .041]; SRMR = .020. As documented in Table B1, all observed indicators loaded robustly and significantly on their

designated latent factors ($p < .001$), with standardized factor loadings λ ranging from .573 to 1.006. The full visual mapping of this latent structure, including standardized path coefficients and indicator error pathways, is illustrated in **Figure B1**.

The latent factor intercorrelation matrix strongly validated the dual-process framework undergoing contemporary SDT. The three psychological need satisfaction dimensions exhibited uniform negative associations with turnover intention (Autonomy Satisfaction: $r = -.595$; Relatedness Satisfaction: $r = -.486$; Competence Satisfaction: $r = -.187$). Conversely, the three need frustration pathways demonstrated distinct, positive correlations with institutional exit intent (Autonomy Frustration: $r = .571$; Relatedness Frustration: $r = .572$; Competence Frustration: $r = .139$).

Crucially, satisfaction and frustration factors within each corresponding need domain correlated negatively with one another (Autonomy: $r = -.609$; Competence: $r = -.720$; Relatedness: $r = -.839$). These stark, non-collinear distinctions confirm that psychological need frustration operates as a functionally distinct structural phenomenon rather than the mere absence of need satisfaction (Van den Broeck et al., 2016).

Table B1: Seven-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (*N* = 451)
Table B1.

Seven-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (N=451)

Factor	Item	Loading (λ)	SE	z	p
Autonomy Satisfaction	Q1_1	.706	.041	17.1	< .001
	Q1_2	.749	.040	18.9	< .001
Autonomy Frustration	OrgQ1_3	.668	.050	13.3	< .001
	OrgQ1_4	.824	.060	13.8	< .001
Competence Satisfaction	Q2_1	.595	.026	23.1	< .001
	Q2_2	.573	.024	24.0	< .001
Competence Frustration	OrgQ2_3	.561	.036	15.7	< .001

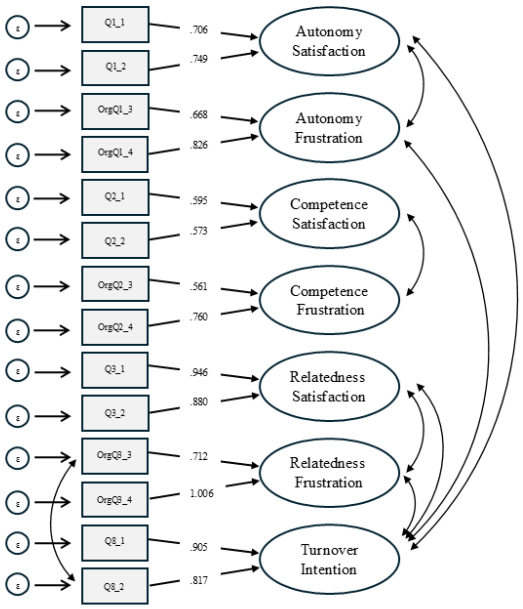
	OrgQ2_4	.760	.038	20.1	< .001
Relatedness Satisfaction	Q3_1	.946	.037	25.3	< .001
	Q3_2	.880	.040	22.1	< .001
Relatedness Frustration	OrgQ3_3	.712	.044	16.2	< .001
	OrgQ3_4	1.006	.044	22.8	< .001
Turnover Intention	Q8_1	.905	.054	16.9	< .001
	Q8_2	.817	.050	16.4	< .001

Note. $N = 451$. All loadings significant at $p < .001$. DWLS estimation used for ordinal Likert-scale data. λ = standardized factor loading.

Figure B1: Seven-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings ($N = 451$)

Figure B1.

Seven-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (N = 451)



Supplementary Twelve-Factor Organizational Stressor Model

To guarantee measurement adequacy and ensure distinct structural boundaries among the independent environmental variables prior to path modeling and parallel mediation analyses, a supplementary 12-factor measurement model was evaluated. This expanded structure simultaneously modeled the six primary psychological need subscales, an independent affective

strain construct (Burnout), and the four underlying institutional stressor constructs (Ineffective Leadership, Lack of Career Goals, and Work-Life Balance).

The 12-factor model achieved acceptable fit to the data: $\chi^2(269) = 612$, $p < .001$; CFI = .959; TLI = .946; RMSEA = .052 [.047, .058]; SRMR = .050. To achieve clean structural separation across these complex operational domains, five items displaying poor factor loadings (< .50) or high modification indices indicative of extensive construct cross-loading were removed during refinement (Burnout: Q4_3, Q4_4; Lack of Career Goals: Q6_1; Work-Life Balance: Q7_1; Turnover Intention: Q8_4). Additionally, while three turnover intention indicators were maintained here to ensure cross-loading stability across the extensive environmental stressor array, this structure was systematically distilled down to the two primary, highly reliable indicators used in the core final models.

As presented in Table B2, all retained items demonstrated statistically significant factor loadings on their respective latent dimensions ($p < .001$), ranging from .668 to .952, successfully validating the structural independence of the organizational stressors. The comprehensive path diagram displaying the complete 12-factor structure and its associated indicator tracking is provided in **Figure B2**.

Table B2: Twelve-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (*N* = 451)
Table B2.

Twelve-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (N = 451)

Factor	Item	Loading (λ)	z	p
Autonomy Satisfaction	Q1_1	.768	17.54	< .001
	Q1_2	.835	19.26	< .001
Autonomy Frustration	OrgQ1_3	.668	12.85	< .001
	OrgQ1_4	.759	14.18	< .001
Competence Satisfaction	Q2_1	.896	23.15	< .001
	Q2_2	.920	24.06	< .001

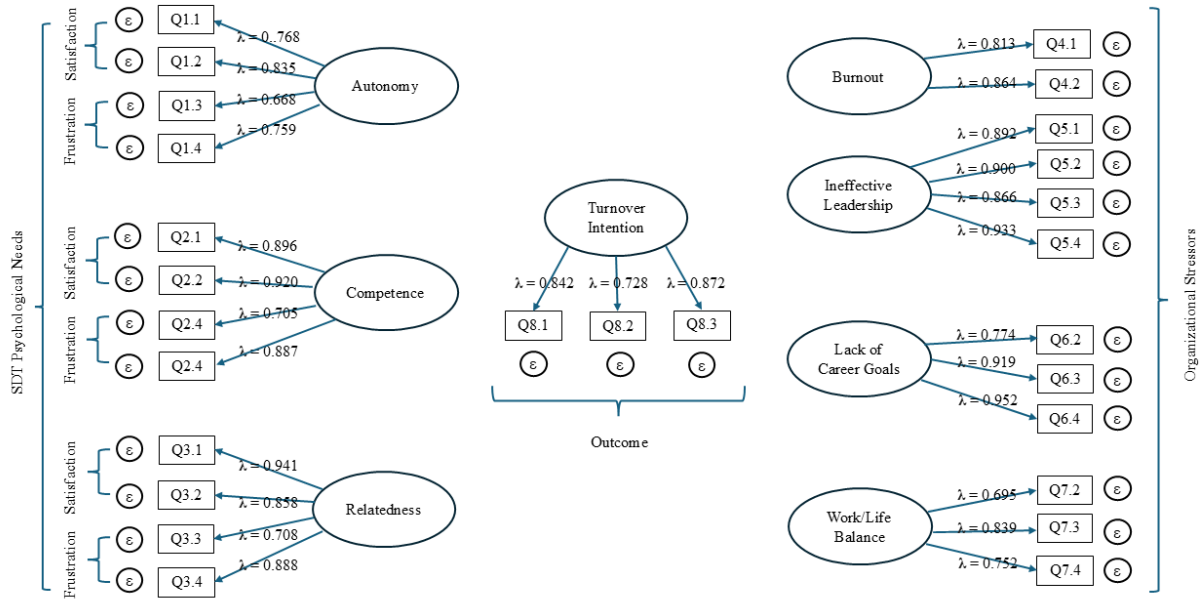
Competence Frustration	OrgQ2_3	.705	15.64	< .001
	OrgQ2_4	.887	20.08	< .001
Relatedness Satisfaction	Q3_1	.941	25.38	< .001
	Q3_2	.858	22.09	< .001
Relatedness Frustration	OrgQ3_3	.708	16.58	< .001
	OrgQ3_4	.888	22.05	< .001
Burnout	Q4_1	.813	19.58	< .001
	Q4_2	.864	20.28	< .001
Ineffective Leadership	Q5_1	.892	24.27	< .001
	Q5_2	.900	24.58	< .001
	Q5_3	.886	23.97	< .001
	Q5_4	.933	26.18	< .001
Lack of Career Goals	Q6_2	.774	19.23	< .001
	Q6_3	.919	25.43	< .001
	Q6_4	.952	26.96	< .001
Work-Life Balance	Q7_2	.695	15.37	< .001
	Q7_3	.839	19.04	< .001
	Q7_4	.752	16.29	< .001
Turnover Intention	Q8_1	.842	21.35	< .001
	Q8_2	.728	17.26	< .001
	Q8_3	.872	22.57	< .001

Note. All loadings significant at $p < .001$. SDT = Self-Determination Theory. DWLS estimation used for ordinal Likert-scale data (Kenny et al., 2015). Items removed during model refinement are excluded from this table.

Figure B2: Twelve-factor confirmatory factor analysis measurement model (*N* = 451)

Figure B2.

Twelve-Factor Measurement Model: Standardized Factor Loadings (N = 451)



Note. $N = 451$. Model fit: $\chi^2(269) = 612$, $p < .001$; CFI = .959; TLI = .946; RMSEA = .052 (90% CI [.047, .058]); SRMR = .050. Parameters estimated using Diagonally Weighted Least Squares (DWLS). Standardized factor loadings (λ) reported for all indicator-factor relationships. ε = measurement error term for each observed indicator. Items Q4_3, Q4_4 (Burnout), Q6_1 (Lack of Career Goals), Q7_1 (Work-Life Balance), and Q8_4 (Turnover Intention) were removed during model refinement due to low factor loadings (< .50) or high modification indices indicating construct overlap. All factor loadings are statistically significant at $p < .001$.

APPENDIX C: STUDY 3 MATERIALS

IRB Approval for Study 3

The UNIVERSITY of OKLAHOMA

Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects

Approval of Study Modification – Expedited Review – AP0

Date: December 15, 2025 **IRB#:** 18244

Principal Investigator: Phil Salon **Reference No: 782642**

Study Title: Understanding voluntary administrative staff turnover at higher education satellite campuses post-covid: A qualitative study through self-determination theory.

Approval Date: 12/15/2025

Modification Description:
Modifying original study to include Program Administrator Interviews for Paper #3. This is necessary to gather data about their involvement in administering a wellbeing program.

The review and approval of this submission is based on the determination that the study, as amended, will continue to be conducted in a manner consistent with the requirements of 45 CFR 46.

To view the approved documents for this submission, open this study from the My Studies option, go to Submission History, go to Completed Submissions tab and then click the Details icon.

If the consent form(s) were revised as a part of this modification, discontinue use of all previous versions of the consent form.

If you have questions about this notification or using iRIS, contact the HRPP office at (405) 325-8110 or irb@ou.edu. The HRPP Administrator assigned for this submission: Nicole A Cunningham.

Cordially,

Lara Mayeux

Lara Mayeux, Ph.D.
Chair, Institutional Review Board

Consent to Participate in Research

Oral Consent to Participate in Research

University of Oklahoma

Would you like to be involved in research at the University of Oklahoma?

I am Phil Salon from the OU-Tulsa's College of Education, and I invite you to participate in my research entitled Theory-Informed Assessment of Wellbeing Program Alignment with Administrative Staff Psychological Needs in Higher Education. This research is being conducted at OU. You were selected as a possible participant because you are a program administrator of a wellbeing program at a higher education institution. You must be at least 18 years of age to participate in this research.

Please read this document and contact me to ask any questions you may have BEFORE agreeing to participate in my research.

What is the purpose of this research? This research aims to understand to what extent does the wellbeing program demonstrates theoretical alignment with Self-Determination Theory principles for supporting psychological needs.

How many participants will be in this research? About 10 people will take part in this research.

What will I be asked to do? If you agree to be in this research, I will use zoom to record audio and video during the interview. You will be asked a few questions regarding your time at work and why you left.

How long will this take? Your participation will take 30-45 minutes.

What are the risks and benefits if I participate? The following are possible risks of participating in this research study.

Questions that could be emotionally distressing: We will ask you to answer questions that may make you distressed or trigger strong emotional reactions. If these questions make you feel uncomfortable, you do not have to provide an answer, or you can stop our discussion or discontinue participation in the research. If the researcher sees signs that you are distressed, they will pause the discussion and ask if you would like to continue.

Audio or video recorded data collection: There is a risk of accidental data release if we collect your data using audio and video recordings. If this occurred, your identity and statements you made would become known to people who are not on the research team. To minimize this risk, the researchers will transfer data to, and store your data on, a secure platform approved by the University's Information Technology Office.



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Data collected online (zoom): You will be asked to be interviewed and recorded online (zoom) as part of this research. The organization hosting the data collection platform has its own privacy and security policies for keeping your information confidential. There is a risk that the external organization, which is not part of the research team, may gain access to or retain your data or your IP address which could be used to re-identify you. No assurance can be made about their use of the data you provide for purposes other than this research.

What are the benefits if I participate? N/A

Will I be compensated for participating? You are not reimbursed for your time and participation in this research.

Who will see my information? There will be no information in research reports that will make it possible to identify you. Research records will be stored securely, and only approved researchers and the OU Institutional Review Board will have access to the records.

You have the right to access the research data that has been collected about you as a part of this research. However, you may not access this information until the entire research has finished and you consent to this temporary restriction.

Do I have to participate? No. If you do not participate, you will not be penalized or lose benefits or services unrelated to the research. If you decide to participate, you don't have to answer any questions and can stop participating at any time.

Will my identity be anonymous or confidential? Your name will not be retained or linked with your responses unless you agree to be identified. Please check all of the options that you agree to:

I agree for data records to include my identifiable information. ___Yes ___ No

I agree to be quoted directly, without the use of my name. ___ Yes ___ No

I agree to have my name reported with quoted material. ___Yes ___ No

I agree for my research data to be archived for scholarly and public access. ___Yes ___ No

What will happen to my data in the future? We will not share your data or use it in future research.

Audio Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses, interviews may be recorded on an audio recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording without penalty. If you do not agree to audio-recording, you cannot participate in this research.



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I consent to audio recording. ___Yes ___ No

Video Recording of Research Activities To assist with accurate recording of your responses interviews may be recorded on a video recording device. You have the right to refuse to allow such recording. If you do not agree to video-recording, you cannot participate in this research. Please select one of the following options:

I consent to video recording. ___ Yes ___ No

Will I be contacted again? The researcher might contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research.

I give my permission for the researcher to contact me in the future. ___Yes ___ No

Who do I contact with questions, concerns, or complaints? If you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research, contact me at psalon@ou.edu. My faculty advisor is Dr. Curt Adams, curtadams@ou.edu

You can also contact the University of Oklahoma – Norman Campus Institutional Review Board (OU-NC IRB) at 405-325-8110 or irb@ou.edu if you have questions about your rights as a research participant, concerns, or complaints about the research and wish to talk to someone other than the researcher(s) or if you cannot reach the researcher(s).

I will be asking some questions to find out how you want me to report your ideas. You can refuse any that you do not like without any penalty.

Do you agree to being quoted directly, without the use of your name? ___ Yes ___No

Do you agree for your data to be archived for scholarly and public access? ___Yes ___No

Do you consent to audio recording? ___ Yes___ No

Do you consent to video recording? ___ Yes___ No

May I contact you to gather additional data or recruit you for new research? ___Yes ___No

Finally, would you like a printed or electronic copy of the information we have just reviewed? _____ (note response)



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Date of interview: _____

Name of Interviewee: _____

Mailing or Email address for electronic consent copy:
_____

Name of Researcher and Date of the Consent Process:
_____

Signature of the Researcher:
_____



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Theory Coding Scheme

Item 1) Theory / model of behavior mentioned.

Item 2) Targeted construct mentioned.

Item 3) Intervention based on single theory.

Item 4) Theory used to select recipients.

Item 5) Theory used to select intervention techniques.

Item 6) Theory used to tailor intervention techniques to recipients.

Item 7) All intervention techniques are explicitly linked to theory construct.

Item 8) At least one of the intervention techniques is explicitly linked to theory construct.

Item 9) Group of techniques are linked to a group of constructs.

Item 10) All theory relevant constructs are explicitly linked to at least one intervention technique.

Item 11) At least one of the theory relevant constructs are explicitly linked to at least one intervention technique.

Item 12) theory-relevant constructs are measured.

Item 13) Quality of measures.

Item 14) Randomization of participants' condition.

Item 15) Changes in measured theory-relevant constructs.

Item 16) Mediational analysis of constructs.

Item 17) Results discussed in relation to theory.

Item 18) Appropriate support for theory

Item 19) Results used to refine theory.

Interview Protocol

Project: Theory-Informed Assessment of Wellbeing Program Alignment with Administrative Staff Psychological Needs in Higher Education

Based on: Michie & Prestwich (2010) Theory Coding Scheme

Time of Interview:

Date:

Interviewee ID:

Interview Script:

Thank you for participating in this research study about theory-informed assessment of a wellbeing program. This interview is an opportunity for you to share your thoughts and experiences the wellbeing program. This should take approximately 30-45 minutes. I am going to ask you a series of questions and I will be recording this zoom session with your consent. Please answer to the best of your ability and note that this is voluntary. You may choose not to answer any questions and can end the interview at any time. I may follow up later for clarification after reviewing the data or analysis.

This recording will be kept confidential and will only be used for research purposes. Your personal information as well as anything you share will be de-identified in any publications and if quoted, your name will not be used.

Before we begin:

1. Do you have any questions for me before we start? ___Yes or ___No
2. Do you agree to voluntarily participate in this research? ___Yes or ___No (Stop here)

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3. Do I have your consent to begin recording? ___Yes or ___No

Program Administrator Interview Questions:

Program foundations

1. When you designed this program, what main ideas, assumptions, or prior experiences guided how you thought change would happen?
2. How did you decide which behaviors or outcomes the program should focus on changing?
3. Would you say your approach is mainly based on one central way of thinking about behavior change, or is it a mix of several ideas and experiences?

Who the program targets

4. How did you decide which people or groups the program should serve?
5. What made you think this particular group would benefit most from the program?

How activities were chosen and tailored

6. How did you decide which strategies, activities, or components to include in the program (for example, education, skills practice, reminders, coaching)?
7. What specific factors influencing behavior (such as knowledge, confidence, habits, social support, or environment) did you intend each main activity to change?

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8. Thinking about all the important factors you believe drive behavior in this context, do you feel each of them is addressed by at least one program activity? Are there any key factors you intentionally did not address?

Measurement and evaluation

11. Which of the key factors you aim to influence (for example, knowledge, attitudes, confidence, skills, social support) do you actually measure in your evaluations?
12. How did you decide which of these factors to measure and when to measure them?
13. What tools or methods do you use to measure these factors (for example, surveys, checklists, observation), and how do you judge whether those measures are good enough for your purposes?
14. Have you seen changes over time in the factors you are trying to influence? Can you describe what has changed the most?

Learning from results and refining your approach

17. Have you made any changes to the program, or to your understanding of how it works, based on what you have learned from the results? If so, what changed?

***General Probing Questions**

- #Could you elaborate on that point?
- #Can you provide a specific example?

IRB APPROVED AMIRPP
IRB NUMBER: 18244
IRB APPROVAL DATE: 12/15/2025

Table C1: Theory Coding Scheme Codebook

Table C1.

Theory Coding Scheme Codebook

TCS #	TCS Question	Coding	Example	Rating
1	Is theory mentioned?	Review wellness handbook introduction, mission statement	"The program aims to support holistic well-being"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
2	Does intervention mention at least 1 construct?	Review program materials for mentions of autonomy, competence, relatedness	"Participants choose activities that fit their lifestyle"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
3	Is the intervention based on a single theory or is it based on multiple theories?	Review program materials to identify whether design is based on: Single theory (SDT only) Multiple theories (SDT + other wellness frameworks) Atheoretical (no explicit theory base)	"Based on the eight dimensions of wellness model"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
4	Is theory used to select recipients or target population?	Examine whether SDT principles guided who within that population might most benefit	"Open to all faculty, staff, and retirees"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
5	Are intervention techniques/components selected based on theory?	Map each program activity category to whether it was chosen to address autonomy, competence, or relatedness needs	Fitness classes, health screenings, step challenges – competence (mastery of health goals)	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
6	Are intervention	Examines whether	Earn points by	0 = No theory

	techniques tailored to recipients based on theory?	activities are adapted based on participants' specific psychological needs	completing activities of YOUR CHOICE across eight dimensions" "Choose activities that fit YOUR schedule and interests	mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
7	Are all intervention techniques explicitly linked to at least one construct of the theory?	Create a comprehensive matrix of ALL activities and assess whether each has clear SDT rationale	“Participate in campus governance to have your voice heard in decisions”	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
8	Is at least one technique explicitly linked to a theory construct?	Need ONE clear example	"Attend professional development workshops to build new skills and advance your career"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
9	Is at least one group of techniques explicitly linked to a group of theory constructs?	Determine whether program categories (eight wellness dimensions) systematically address multiple SDT needs together	"Occupational Wellness supports your career growth, leadership development, and engagement in university decision-making"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
10	Are all three SDT constructs (autonomy, competence, relatedness) addressed by at least one program activity?	Create mapping showing each SDT need has program support	"Choose YOUR wellness path—select activities that fit YOUR lifestyle and interests"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
11	Is at least one SDT	Need ONE example	"Team	0 = No theory

	construct addressed by a program technique?		challenges build relationships" = Relatedness	mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
12	Does the program assess participants' autonomy, competence, and relatedness?	Review program materials for assessment tools, surveys, or feedback mechanisms.	"How do we know if the program is working?"	0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT
13	If constructs are measured, are validated instruments used?	If Item 12 = 0 (no measurement), then Item 13 = N/A		0 = No theory mentioned 1 = General well-being 2 = Specific SDT

Note. TCS = Theory Coding Scheme, SDT = Self-Determination Theory