There is an abundance of research concerning the definition, measurement, and promotion of engagement across various work-related organizations. However, little is known about how we might begin to understand and facilitate engagement among community college faculty. Community college faculty face a unique set of challenges that render them at potentially high-risk for becoming disengaged with their institutions, less concerned with students' learning, and less motivated to make contributions to the larger academic community. Thus, this paper focuses on three equally important tasks. First, I seek to develop a working definition of “engagement” within the community college setting. Second, I propose alternative ways of measuring this construct. And finally, this paper enhances the newly defined, engagement construct.

Community College faculty contend with various obligations and challenges that often supersede those of colleagues within four-year institutions (Bailey, Crosta, & Jenkins, 2007; Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999; VanOra, 2012). Obligations in multiple domains such as teaching, conducting research, and making contributions to both their departments and the larger academic community can often overwhelm community college faculty. It can also lead them to lose sight of their original mission, which focuses primarily on helping at-risk students develop the solid academic foundation necessary for them to move forward in their academic careers and achieve social mobility (Weis, 1985). Moreover, persistence in one’s career goals at a community college can also be stymied by the sense that their work goes under-recognized by colleagues and administrators and the fact that significantly fewer community college students graduate than their four-year college counterparts (Grubb, 1999; Miranda, 2007; Tinto, 1997;
VanOra, 2012). And yet, despite these many struggles, there has been surprisingly little research conducted concerning what it means to be an “engaged” community college faculty member and in particular, the degree to which community college faculty remain engaged, despite various drawbacks and challenges. Moreover, there has been absolutely no research concerning how to enhance community college faculty members’ engagement and help them not only persist, but retain their original motivations to thrive as both teachers and scholars. Thus, this paper seeks to develop a working definition of “engagement” within the community college setting and to propose alternative ways of both measuring and enhancing this construct.

**Defining engagement**

The notion of “engagement” has become a national phenomenon. Within business and other professional settings, engagement is theorized as “the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization, how hard they work, and how long they stay as a result of that commitment” (Lockwood, 2007, p. 2). Others have described engagement as “a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli et al., 2002, p. 74). For those looking to increase their “bottom line” in business, engagement has been linked with higher productivity, sales, client satisfaction ratings, and retention of employees (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Moreover, in everyday life, engagement is often associated with the sort of commitment, passion, effort, attitude, energy, and motivation that is needed to persist on tasks and remain within an organization (Little & Little, 2006; Luthans & Peterson, 2002; Macey & Schneider, 2008; VanOra & Symister, 2012). Others use terms such as “citizenship,” “motivation,” “drive,” “persistence,” and “emotional and intellectual commitment to the organization” to define engagement within an organization (Saks, 2006, p. 601).

Many theorists believe that engagement need be construed as a multifaceted construct, with a focus on those behavioral, cognitive, and emotional factors that contribute to the overall picture of an “engaged employee” (Luthans & Peterson, 2002). Researchers underscore the notion that engagement involves how one thinks about her/his work on an everyday basis, the concrete efforts made toward completion, and the amount of enthusiasm one feels when engaged in work-related tasks. *The Business Communicator* (2005) describes the cognitive element of engagement as an employee’s knowledge about the task at hand and the affective (or emotional) element as tied to motivation, dedication, and enthusiasm. Engagement has also been associated with a willingness to work collectively and communicate effectively with others, while retaining a sense of individual responsibility in the ultimate outcome of one’s efforts (VanOra & Symister, 2012). Engagement has also been construed as a combination of “attention” and “absorption” and the “amount of time one spends thinking about a role” (Saks, 2006). Engagement has been correlated with self-efficacy, or the notion that an
individual (manager or employee) has the ability to execute specific tasks within the context of their professional environments (Luthans & Peterson, 2002).

Despite the importance of engagement for success in the workplace, recent reports have revealed a “decline in employee engagement” and an “engagement gap” that might cost U.S. businesses billions of dollars in lost productivity (Saks, 2006, p. 600). This decline in engagement is generally associated with a lack of autonomy, the sense that one’s job is unimportant, and a feeling of detachment from the larger outcomes of one’s endeavors (Luthans & Peterson, 2002, p. 378). An extreme version of this would be “burnout,” which is defined as a somewhat toxic combination of workplace exhaustion, cynicism, and inefficacy. In short, the differences between engaged and disengaged employees is aptly illuminated by Lockwood (2007), who distinguishes among “Engaged employees . . . who work with passion and feel a profound connection to their company,” “Not engaged employees, who are essentially ‘checked-out’,” and “Actively disengaged employees, who undermine what their engaged co-workers accomplish” (p. 3).

**Existing engagement measures**

Various scales and measures have been developed to determine engagement across a variety of business settings. Saks’ (2006, p. 618) measure of employee engagement distinguishes between engagement with one’s “job” and with the larger organization. Engagement with one’s job is measured through responses to questions that range from “I throw myself into my job,” to “This job is all consuming” and “My mind often wanders . . . when doing my job,” while organizational engagement is measured through questions such as “Being a member of this organization is very captivating,” “I am not really into the ‘goings-on’ in this organization,” and “I am highly engaged in this organization.” This scale also asks questions concerning recognition of one’s effort, degree of organizational support, and the extent to which employees feel that the job draws on a variety of their skills and talents. This measure has been used to reveal various antecedents to both job and organizational engagement and in particular, the relationship between perceived organizational support and one’s level of engagement within one’s specific job and within the larger organization. In addition, the Gallup Workplace Audit (GWA), a well-recognized measure of engagement within business and sales organizations, focuses specifically on “productivity, profitability, employee retention, and customer service” (Little & Little, 2006, p. 112). This measure also attempts to determine the degree to which a person is “emotionally engaged” at work and has also allowed researchers to develop three categories of engagement, which include “actively engaged,” “nonengaged,” and “actively disengaged” employees (Little & Little, 2006, p. 112).

One measure of engagement that has been applied within the context of a Business University setting is the Management Education Faculty Survey, which asks faculty to respond to questions concerning the extent of faculty members’ satisfaction with administration; academic services; opportunities for sabbatical; professional development concerning new and innovative pedagogical strategies;
monies made available for travel, research grants, annual review processes; ability to engage in multidisciplinary research; and the promotion and tenure system (Awal et al., 2006). Findings from this survey indicated faculty satisfaction with research assistants, classroom facilities, and quality of students, and dissatisfaction with various aspects of administration. The authors argue that results of assessment measures such as this one can lead to positive outcomes and better ensure the motivation and engagement of faculty members at university settings.

The limitations and need for further research

Although the above-mentioned definitions and measures of engagement are generally useful, there remain some serious limitations. Despite attempts to define and measure engagement, there is little consensus around (a) whether engagement is an attitude or behavior; (b) whether engagement operates exclusively on an individual and/or group level; (c) how to distinguish between “engagement” and similar constructs; (d) how to effectively measure the construct in a way that minimizes subjectivity (Little & Little, 2006). One common critique is that almost all definitions of engagement are based predominantly on cognitive/emotional factors such as motivation, confidence, and job satisfaction. This can create problems of subjectivity and subsequently problems of measurement. It goes without saying that engagement may have a cognitive foundation but focusing on cognitive constructs alone can lead measures to be wrought with subjectivity and could create problems of reliability, state-based responses, and subsequently validity as a whole.

An additional concern is that the literature on engagement within two- and four-year college settings is generally limited to exploration of student—rather than faculty member—engagement within the classroom (Schnee & VanOra, 2012; VanOra, 2012). For example, Schussler (2009) depicts student engagement as “a deeper connection between the student and the material whereby a student develops an interest in the topic or retains the learning beyond the short term” (p. 115) and recognizes the challenges that faculty face when students appear disinterested in completing assignments and participating in class discussions. Additionally, in a report by the Western Region Campus Compact Consortium engagement was implicitly defined as efforts to involve or incorporate students in service learning (2009). Within the college setting, student engagement is often contrasted with classroom “incivility,” which is framed around complaints by instructors concerning students walking in late or leaving a lecture early, using cell phones during class, disrupting lectures through chatting with other classmates, and engaging in activities that are not directly related to the topic at hand (Patron & Bisping, 2008; Schnee & VanOra, 2012). Moreover, incivility (or a serious lack of engagement on the part of students) also refers to action that interferes with a cooperative and harmonious learning environment and includes a number of instances in which students’ learning has been impaired by various forms of classroom misconduct (Feldman, 2001).
In the current paper, I assert the need for research that both redefines and measures instructors’ engagement within the community college classroom. By learning about and finding ways to promote instructors’ capacities to remain engaged long-term, we are far more likely to promote long-term student persistence, conserve resources by nurturing the faculty already in place, and avoid overburdening highly committed individual instructors by ensuring that the majority of faculty members remain engaged in the efforts of the college. Moreover, because the needs of community college faculty are distinctive in that they include students’ lack of preparedness and administrative obligations beyond teaching, I argue that how we define and measure engagement within this context need be tailored accordingly (Cohen & Brawer, 2003; Cox, 2009; Grubb, 1999).

**The current research proposal and redefining engagement**

In response to the above concerns, I look at redefining engagement in a way that reconceptualizes it as a more measurable (and less subjective) construct. There are clear behavioral components that are indelibly intertwined with the construct of engagement such as retention, attendance, and organizational involvement. Therefore, in order to add a greater level of objectivity and subsequent potential for measurement, a working definition of engagement must address behavioral components. The aforementioned behavioral components can then lead to the construction of more objective measures. It is worth mentioning that some research on engagement places some emphasis on behaviors; for example, the Gallup Organization’s 12-item survey on engagement (Keyes and Haidt, 2002) includes two questions that are predominantly objective by nature wherein the individual responding to the survey needs to state whether he/she has received praise or recognition for his/her work and has someone talked to him/her about his/her progress. However, the majority of the questions are based on more subjective constructs as mentioned earlier.

Therefore we are left with two separate, but intertwined problems. One problem is in constructing a definition of engagement that addresses the cognitive/emotional as well as the behavioral components of engagement. The second problem is in creating a scale that measures the above written constructs objectively. Cognitive/emotional constructs of engagement are as follows: motivation, confidence, enjoyment of work-related activities, satisfaction, confidence, pride, loyalty, knowledge of one’s job and an understating of the organization’s mission, connections with a company, and finally, feelings of depression (Little & Little, 2006). Some existing definitions of engagement also mention behavioral components of engagement such as absenteeism, retention, productivity, profitability, safety, discretionary behaviors that exceed obligations, and customer/consumer service (Crabtree, 2005; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1997; Wellins & Concelman, 2004). Almost all of the constructs above have subsequent behavioral indicators that are measurable and are not addressed explicitly in other measures.
This author believes that it is possible to create an empirical measure for most if not all of the constructs outlined above. For example, student/peer and administrative evaluations, retention rates, project initiation, positive feedback on evaluations, and interpersonal conflicts with colleagues at work are measurable. Additionally, one can measure constructs such as enjoyment of work-related activities via reports on behaviors that include project initiation and increased time spent on work-related activities. Feelings of depression, job satisfaction, loyalty, and confidence may not be directly measurable; however, the aforementioned constructs may be measurable indirectly through work-related activities such as (again) time spent working on projects that go beyond the minimum requisite to keep one’s current employment. Lastly, feelings of depression due to work-related stressors may yield measurable behaviors as well. Depression affects sleep, feelings of health, and health-related behaviors. This could lead to absenteeism, which is measurable. Therefore, in order to add a level of objectivity to measures of engagement, something that is lacking in existing measures, there must be a more significant focus on objective behaviors. This would not only validate the measure but also potentially lead to the creation of a practical structured intervention designed at increasing engagement as well as adding a quantifiable measurement of any intervention’s success.

Lastly, the scale of measurement cannot be discrete. Coffman and Gonzalez-Molina state that employee engagement can be grouped into three categories: actively engaged, nonengaged, and the actively disengaged (2002, p. 26); however, this too poses a number of problems for the individual as well as for the organization. First, it leaves little room for the organization to see changes in the employee’s level of engagement. It assumes that every individual within each of the three categories is identical to others in his/her defined level of engagement. Second, it limits the individual’s ability to see improvement in himself or herself, which could be counterproductive as it may lead to frustration and subsequent disengagement. Lastly, it limits the employer’s understanding of the employee’s engagement. Engagement is not a unitary construct. It is possible to be behaviorally engaged but not emotionally engaged and vice versa. Each individual within an organization may require different interventions to increase their engagement. Therefore the proposed measure of engagement, although maintaining some of the qualities of existing measures, has a major focus on empirical/objective behaviors. For example, it looks at absenteeism, the initiation of projects, and evaluations by supervisors. Although it can be argued that there remains a subjective quality to the aforementioned categories, it is a step in the right direction.

Therefore the new definition proposed is as follows: “An engaged individual is someone who is involved (beyond minimal responsibilities), has an understanding of responsibilities related to the organization’s mission, and an overall feeling of well-being that relates either directly or indirectly to work satisfaction.” The scale presented below is constructed on the above-mentioned definition of engagement and should be validated through use in a two-year, academic setting.
A new measure of engagement for community college faculty

Below I propose an engagement measure that more explicitly addresses the specific needs and challenges of faculty within community college settings, and following, an intervention aimed at enhancing engagement among full-time, community college faculty members. The survey presented below is a new survey that measures employee engagement. It not only contains cognitive and perceptual measures related to engagement, but it also taps into behavioral/quantifiable and objective measures.

• How many absences do you take in a year?
• How many additional days do you come in to work in a year?
• On average, how many hours do you spend doing college-related or work related tasks per week?
• Outside of sabbatical time or paid leave, how many hours do you spend at the college per week?

The following questions will be administered on a Likert scale with responses being limited to: “I strongly disagree,” “I disagree,” “I agree,” and “I strongly agree.”

• I find myself initiating projects at work.
• I have noticed that I have missed meetings at work.
• I plan on staying at my current job as long as I can.
• I have had negative comments written in my yearly evaluations.
• If a better job comes along I will take it.
• I find myself looking forward to coming to work every day.
• I would move to a different profession for more money.
• Since I’ve started working here I find myself getting sick more often.
• I feel that my mood has improved since starting this job.
• I find myself arguing with my supervisors and/or colleagues regularly.
• I know what the mission of my college is.
• Since I have started working here I find that I feel physically healthier.
• I feel that my presence here benefits my colleagues.
• I agree with the organization’s mission.
• I feel that my colleagues support my decisions at work.
• I am actively working on new ways to contribute to the organization.
• Most of my classroom observations have been satisfactory at minimum.
Typically, my student evaluations aggregate to 4 or higher.

I have received at least two recommendations for improvement on my yearly evaluation letter.

I would leave if I got a job at a more prestigious institution.

**Conclusion**

**Promoting faculty engagement**

Research on faculty engagement is limited at best. Its main focus is on student engagement in college-related activities; however, there is little focus on increasing the engagement of faculty. Faculty engagement can have a tremendous impact not only on students’ futures but the future of the college as well. It is well understood that disengaged faculty can lower student retention rates and result in poorer student outcomes in the future. But what is less recognized is the potential impact that disengaged faculty can have on the college or university as a whole. A disengaged faculty member can strain college resources. Other faculty members may have to pick up the slack of a disengaged professor. Professors who are disengaged may need to be replaced, which costs the college money and time. Disengaged faculty members may damage the reputation of the college and turn potential students away. The financial and intangible costs to the college are potentially limitless. It is important to remember there are a number of factors that can foster disengagement in faculty members. Community college students bring a unique set of challenges to faculty. They can have higher attrition rates, more outside responsibilities, and more financial challenges thus leading to an increase in requisite effort of the faculty to keep them engaged. This in turn can place an added burden on the professors to maintain the students’ level of engagement as well as maintain his or her own level of engagement. Although there is a fair amount of literature on faculty engagement in both the senior and junior college level, there is little to no literature on faculty engagement in the junior college level. The junior colleges can be a place where students begin their careers, decide on future professions, or start their transitions to senior colleges. Maintaining engagement can be life-altering for students. The first step in maintaining engagement is by measuring it. Once engagement is measured accurately, subsequent interventions designed to increase faculty engagement can follow.

Once identified, a possible way to increase faculty engagement may lie in motivational interviewing (MI) (Miller & Rollnick, 2002). MI is a technique used in therapy to increase a client’s involvement in the therapeutic process. MI techniques have already been altered and used with clients who are struggling with substance abuse and medication compliance in diabetes care. There is adequate reason to believe that MI techniques can be altered and used to increase engagement and prevent burnout. Additionally, there can be another benefit to the research above. The implementation of this survey may be able to detect faculty members who are just starting to become disengaged. If lower levels
of engagement are detected early it may be possible to reengage faculty before burnout occurs. Preventing burnout can save the college money, time, and most importantly, serve as a benefit to the student body. Ultimately, more research into engagement is needed, but this author believes that validating this survey is the first step in mitigating community faculty disengagement in the community college setting.

References


