Chapter 7

SENSE OF COMMUNITY IN A UNIVERSITY SETTING
Campus as Workplace

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INTRODUCTION

The term sense of community (SOC) is used liberally in both the popular press and psychology, sociology, and management literatures to characterize a variety of social settings, including families, neighborhoods, schools, organizations, cities and rural areas, businesses and industries. Various instruments have been developed to measure sense of community in a variety of settings, and it has been documented among adults, adolescents, and pre-adolescents. It is apparent from these references that the authors judge sense of community as something to be desired, something for which to strive. It seems as if everyone knows what sense of community is, and most everyone seems to want it.

Despite the ubiquitous use of the phrase, there remain many questions regarding the meaning and application of sense of community in diverse settings and populations. It is a challenge to assess SOC in a manner that is grounded in community theory, while at the same time making no assumptions about the similarities in dimensions and correlates from setting to setting. Various efforts to assess SOC have been based on differing theoretical foundations, which prevent comparisons between results, and limits theory building and testing (Chipuer & Pretty, 1999).

The authors were part of a community research group (CRG) known for its work on sense of community (e.g., Chavis & Newbrough, 1986; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Newbrough & Chavis, 1986). They encountered
an opportunity to explore the relationship between sense of community and trust on the campus of a research university where the chief executive officer (the Dean) was new and wanted to involve the faculty in strategic planning. This dean encountered a belief that faculty morale was low and that this was a factor in the daily round of work. As part of the strategic planning process, the dean decided that there should be an initial assessment of morale of the faculty and staff. This could then serve as a benchmark for later assessments that might show whether the planning affected the morale. Morale on this campus was approached in sense of community terms as “campus as community” had been a theme of a prior study by the faculty senate.

THE CAMPUS AS COMMUNITY

Our inquiry into sense of community in the university workplace and the relationship between SOC and trust is built on the theoretical foundation laid by McMillan and Chavis (1986), as recommended by Chipuer and Pretty (1999). The earliest inquiry into sense of community used neighborhood as the referent. Shortly afterwards, researchers began to broaden their conceptualization of community beyond the neighborhood to include cities, schools, etc.

Communities are social phenomena with central characteristics that bring the people and organizations together. Typically, they are characterized as being either location-based or interest-based settings. Location-based communities are often residential and have the primary subgroup designated as a neighborhood. When the setting is a workplace, location within a common building or on a common floor can serve as the central characteristic. Interest communities are more likely to be identified by an activity center, such as a religious community (church), or a function, like a professional organization. The university, however, can be considered a combination of both location and interest-based communities.

The university is a centrally important institution in the society and is organized around two goals: (1) the discovery of knowledge through the nurturance of individual talent, and (2) the passing on of knowledge through teaching. Like all social institutions, morale is an important aspect of the experience, and the level of morale greatly affects performance. Morale at educational institutions can be described as “school spirit” and is associated with student morale and sports activities. Yet, the campus is also a workplace, one to which concepts from organizational psychology and the construct of sense of community (SOC) can be applied.

Hill (1996) noted that sense of community is setting specific. Therefore, the researcher must understand the unique characteristics of the setting before initiating a research project, so that setting specific correlates can be included in an assessment of sense of community. There are elements common to most universities, such as mission, purpose, and organizational