

Organizational Commitment of Student Employees:  
A Study of Oakland University Undergraduate Admissions Employees

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To  
The Honors College  
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In partial fulfillment of the  
requirement to graduate from  
The Honors College

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April 2, 2021

**Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to study how the components of organizational commitment vary for a sample of college students working on-campus jobs. Nineteen student employees, 15 current and 4 previous, from Oakland University's Office of Undergraduate Admissions comprised the sample for a survey to assess their organizational commitment. The results of the survey demonstrated that student employees respond to the same factors that employees in longer-term careers do. The sample of student employees responded most strongly to questions asking about affective commitment, demonstrating that factors of affective commitment are very important to student employees. The study confirmed that the established measure of organizational commitment is relevant for and applicable to college students working in alternative employment situations.

*Keywords:* Organizational commitment, student employment

**Organizational Commitment of Student Employees:****A Study of Oakland University Undergraduate Admissions Employees**

Organizational commitment considers how attached an employee feels to their organization based on three components: affective, continuance, and normative (Meyer & Allen, 1991). Affective commitment is the extent to which an employee feels emotionally attached. Continuance commitment concerns the costs an individual associates with leaving the organization. Normative commitment is commitment that originates from an individual's sense of obligation to an organization.

Organizational commitment is an essential consideration in the workplace because it has been linked to turnover intentions and job satisfaction (Ayudogdu & Asikgil, 2011). Turnover intentions are an employee's behavior and attitudes regarding leaving the organization, with high turnover intent meaning an employee strongly considers withdrawing from the organization. Job satisfaction is the degree to which employees positively regard their employment. Highly committed individuals are significantly less likely to have intent to turnover and are significantly more likely to experience higher job satisfaction. In order to have a successful business environment, it is essential to have these highly committed employees to drive the workplace culture, develop professionally and enhance the organization, and participate with valuable insights to improve the working conditions.

Based on the three types of commitment, there are three primary reasons why people choose to stay with an organization (Meyer & Allen, 1990). These are due to emotional attachment to an organization (affective commitment), associated costs with leaving (continuance commitment), and a sense of obligation felt (normative commitment).

College students may elect to work an on-campus job for unique reasons. For example, on-campus employment offers convenience for busy students who have to spend a large amount of time on campus anyway. They may not have time to commute to an off-campus job, or they may not have the resources to if they do not have their own means of transportation. Many on-campus positions involve work within food service or various office positions throughout a university, comparable to an average minimum-wage job. The convenience may justify lower pay, or the potential for networking and fostering important relationships may entice students.

College students comprise a distinct population with unique experiences with organizational commitment. Due to the potential reasons described previously, it is hypothesized that the sample of college student employees will report the highest levels of continuance commitment. Since continuance commitment involves an employee's perceived costs with leaving an organization, college students may perceive losses concerning extrinsic factors like pay, the convenience of working on-campus, and the networking opportunities.

Having committed employees is beneficial to employers, as they would prefer to keep their best employees for as long as possible. In knowing the factors that predict and encourage organizational commitment, employers can optimize work environments for their own benefit as well as for their employees.

This project will include a systematic assessment of organizational commitment from a sample of student workers in Oakland University's Office of Undergraduate Admissions. The case analysis of Undergraduate Admissions employees will assess if this unique population of college student employees responds similarly to the established components of organizational commitment, which are affective, continuance, and normative commitment.

This project analyzes employee organizational commitment through established research in the field as well as by addressing a unique population that has not been well researched in this realm. College students working on-campus jobs may hold a variety of reasons for doing so, and not much is known of how strongly this group feels attached to their organization. Through reviewing current research, which primarily focuses on adults working in long-term positions at career focused jobs, the study establishes an understanding of the three types of commitment that were determined in Allen and Meyer's (1990) model. The three types of commitment are then considered and applied to a modified version of the original model in order to be more relevant to college students in general, as well as this particular sample, to ultimately explore how strongly college student employees agree or disagree with the factors of organizational commitment. This project aims to address an important area of research that currently lacks information on a particular population. Examining the tendencies related to commitment trends among college students working on-campus jobs will show differences, if any, between this population and the broader population of "employees" that currently dominates research on organizational commitment.

### **Organizational Commitment in Student Employees**

Relevant articles were reviewed in order to find consistent, established characteristics of organizational commitment with the goal of determining how they extend, if at all, to adult student employees working at an on-campus job. Since college students may have unique reasons for choosing to work an on-campus job, it is essential to understand organizational commitment in student employees. It has been found in college students in particular that when working part-time on-campus jobs, they feel that they gain valuable skills and feel more prepared to enter the job market after graduation (Athas, Oaks, & Kenedy-Phillips, 2013). There are clear

benefits for college students who opt to work at an on-campus job, and they recognize these benefits themselves. The same study found that this is not applicable to college students working at off-campus jobs, which found that students do not experience the same growth and development that those working on-campus jobs experience.

Considering these benefits for working on-campus jobs, many students elect this type of employment at some point during their college career. However, on-campus jobs are not as long-term as other types of employment, and students are often only contractually obligated to work for a semester or two. This can be considered “alternative employment,” and this type of employment has been linked to poor organizational attitudes in individuals who are experiencing stress (Bernhard-Oettel et al., 2008). College students experience stress for many reasons, like difficult coursework or financial aid complications, which inherently makes them more susceptible for lower organizational commitment. For this reason, it is important to see if college students respond to the same components of organizational commitment that adults in more permanent situations experience in order to better meet their needs. The established measure has not been frequently tested on people working in alternative employment situations, and the results from this survey will demonstrate how applicable the measure is.

### **Affective, Continuance, and Normative Commitment**

Three styles of commitment will be assessed in the sample of student employees, as developed by Allen and Meyer’s (1990) model. The three-component model of commitment assesses an employee’s attachment to an organization based on how strongly they want to work there, need to work there, and feel they should work there. These three components are known as affective, continuance, and normative commitment. An employee can feel strong commitment in none, all, or some of these areas. Having all three types of commitment prevalent in an

organization's employees is beneficial because it represents the strongest commitment. They are all important to consider because they speak to an organization's culture and can provide insight as to why their employees choose not to seek other employment. However, it is still beneficial to have employees that are highly committed in just one or two of the components. For example, the researchers who later developed the model also found that employees who score highly on affective commitment, meaning they stay with the organization because they want to, tended to rank higher on performance indexes within their company (Meyer et al., 1989). Thus, organizations would benefit from having employees attached by affective commitment because they outperform employees who are not attached by affective commitment. Based on this example, an organization may opt to prioritize establishing affective commitment in its employee population because they want to increase performance.

Affective commitment can be measured by identifying behaviors that demonstrate a sense of belonging, involvement within the organization's activities and goals, and simply wanting to continue working there (Rhoades et al., 2001). Questions looking for insight into how an organization humanizes itself, the emotions someone feels about their organization, and what the organization means to one's identity can all be useful in measuring affective commitment. This type of commitment is likely to be high in the sample because the job has a friendly atmosphere and the employees may feel attached to their coworkers.

Another type of commitment, continuance, narrows in on the potential losses an individual faces in leaving an organization, or reasons why they need to continue working there (Shore & Wayne, 1993). An individual may not necessarily enjoy their job but keep it regardless because the costs of leaving outweigh the costs of staying. This component can be thought of in terms of external factors, like salary, keeping employees at their organization. For example, even

if an employee wants to quit, they may need to stay at the job in order to pay their bills and be unable to leave the organization. This is predicted to be the highest form of commitment in the sample of student employees, considering factors like convenience and pay that would be lost if the employee chose to leave the organization.

Normative commitment is the third type of organizational commitment that this survey will assess. It is the degree to which an employee feels they are morally obligated to remain with an organization, or they stay there because it is what they should do (Allen & Meyer, 1990). This is an internalized belief held by the employee that it would not be right to leave the organization. While the belief itself is internal and developed by the employee, it can be influenced by external factors; for example, an employee may remain with the company because they believe their supervisor is under a lot of stress and it would not be fair to them to terminate their employment at that time. This type of commitment is likely to be low due to the short-term nature of the job, as employees may not have enough time to develop a strong sense of obligation depending on how long they remain with the organization.

### **Method**

This thesis reviewed current research on the topic of employee commitment to gauge understanding of established factors that influence commitment. Research articles were obtained from online databases including PsycINFO, Psychology Database, and JSTOR. Articles obtained from these sources were found using terms such as “employee commitment,” “organizational commitment,” “work attitudes and commitment,” and “student employment.” The information found from these sources provided knowledge on how to modify the original survey questions in order to best assess organizational commitment within the sample of student employees.

### **Participants**



This study surveyed 19 student employees, with 15 being current employees and 4 of them previously employed. All of them were or are Oakland University students enrolled in a degree program at least half time. Participants were contacted via email with permission from the Visit Coordinator of Undergraduate Admissions, who supervises the Admissions Ambassador program. Selection criteria limited prospective subjects to those who were employed as of January 2020 and was ultimately sent to 18 previous employees and 26 current undergraduate employees.

No demographic information was obtained, aside from whether the employees were currently or previously employed. According to data released by Oakland University, the student population is primarily White and female (Forbes, n.d.). The Office of Undergraduate Admissions is also majority White and female, but the exact demographics of the sample are unknown.

### **Materials**

The survey questions were based on the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ), established by Allen and Meyer (1990). This established measure was used as a base to ensure that the questions asked, adapted for the organization, will provide valid and meaningful results.

The survey was split into three sections to account for each component of Allen and Meyer's (1990) model. Each component had 10 questions to be answered on a Likert scale for a total of 30 questions. The participant was shown values ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree," which were assigned numeric values ranging from 1 to 5, respectively. The middle option on the five-point scale represented a neutral option to demonstrate if the participant did not feel strongly in either direction. The questions considered the unique nature of

on-campus employment, paying particular attention to the work expected of Oakland University Undergraduate Admissions employees.

The affective commitment scale measure consists of items like “I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own” and “I feel like I am part of a family at this organization.” The continuance scale measure includes items like “I see many negative outcomes associated with leaving UGA” and “I believe I have too few other options to consider leaving this organization.” Lastly, the normative commitment scale had items such as “Even if it were to my advantage, it would not be right to leave” and “I owe a great deal to this organization.”

### **Procedure**

The survey was internet-based and conducted in October 2020. It was emailed to current and past employees in order to understand potential differences in commitment between the two employee types, as well as if this measure was relevant for this type of employee at all. The survey consisted of 30 questions and submissions were based on voluntary response with no monetary or other type of incentive.

Upon clicking on the survey, participants were first shown a portion of informed consent. They were told that completing the survey would not affect their work status with Undergraduate Admissions at all, as the survey was completely anonymous, and no identifying questions were asked. After completing the informed consent, the participants were able to answer the survey questions. Nineteen total responses were obtained after one month from the initial day the survey was sent out. This survey, as it involved human subjects, sought and was granted approval by the Institutional Review Board to be conducted.

### **Results**

The survey asked current and previous employees the same questions but was adjusted for past or present tense depending on their response to a screening question that assessed their employment status. It asked questions in three individual sections that pertained to affective, continuance, and normative styles of commitment. The data was analyzed separately for current and previous employees, and then the data was combined to compute an overall mean, median, and standard deviation for each commitment type.

### **Current Employees**

Overall, current employees demonstrated strong commitment. Based on the fifteen respondents, with “1” representing little to no commitment and “5” being very strong commitment, it can be concluded that the employees are experiencing strong affective commitment to UGA ( $M=4.20$ ,  $Mdn=4.30$ ,  $SD=.61$ ). Following the same scale, the survey showed a moderately strong continuance ( $M=3.29$ ,  $Mdn=3.40$ ,  $SD=.64$ ) and normative ( $M=3.84$ ,  $Mdn=3.90$ ,  $SD=.57$ ) commitment. The affective commitment value is the strongest of the three commitment types, suggesting that UGA has most effectively established affective commitment in its employees. The strongest commitment that the employees feel is based on an emotional attachment to the organization. The other values are less strong but still suggest a committed group more than a non-committed group. The participants in the currently employed group are experiencing commitment to their organization.

### **Previous Employees**

The sample of previous employees was much smaller than that of current employees with only four respondents. This is a very small sample size and the data may be skewed because of this. The previous employees demonstrated moderately strong affective ( $M=3.52$ ,  $Mdn=3.60$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ) and normative ( $M=3.38$ ,  $Mdn=3.65$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ) commitment. The previous employees

experienced moderately weak continuance commitment ( $M=2.55$ ,  $Mdn=2.55$ ,  $SD=1.34$ ). The participants in the previously employed group experienced the weakest continuance commitment, which implies that they did not feel that the perceived costs of leaving the organization outweighed the perceived gains of leaving. This is demonstrated by the fact that the employees terminated their employment. This group experienced some commitment but scored lower than the currently employed employees.

### **Current and Previous Employees**

The total sample size for both participant groups is 19. This combined group demonstrated strong affective commitment ( $M=4.06$ ,  $Mdn=4.30$ ,  $SD=.79$ ). The group also demonstrated moderately strong normative commitment ( $M=3.74$ ,  $Mdn=3.90$ ,  $SD=.77$ ). The levels of continuance commitment, while leaning more committed than not, are medial ( $M=3.14$ ,  $Mdn=3.40$ ,  $SD=.85$ ). The overall data suggests that this group of employees, current and previous, are fairly committed and are represented by the established predictors of commitment.

### **Discussion**

Based on the survey responses, answers were often at the more extreme values, which demonstrates that the participants felt that the questions were applicable enough to warrant a strong answer over the neutral middle response. In particular, this sample demonstrated the strongest responses when considering affective commitment. This is important to note because the predictors of affective commitment may be the most important to college students working on-campus jobs. For this sample, this appears to be the case. It may be beneficial for the leadership teams within similar organizations to focus on factors of affective commitment in order to increase job satisfaction and decrease turnover intentions. Continuance commitment was predicted to be the strongest form of commitment because it is rooted in extrinsic motivators that

may be especially important to college student employees. However, affective commitment was the strongest form of commitment; this demonstrates a stronger emotional attachment in the sample rather than stronger extrinsic motivation to continue working the on-campus job.

There were thirty questions total, with ten devoted to each type of commitment. These questions were based on Allen & Meyer's (1990) model but adapted some questions to ask about characteristics of working for Undergraduate Admissions that are unique and may impact the results. The initial model accounted for antecedents of organizational commitment and the questions that were modified were only changed slightly for clarity and relevance as to not impact the framework of the model. Since the model was changed to pertain to this group, it loses some external validity but could still be representative of the larger population of college student employees working on-campus jobs.

The survey questions were developed from a pre-established, valid measure of organizational commitment, specifically used to test organizational commitment in adult employees working in long-term career positions. While the college students tested were all adults over 18 years old, the type of work they do is most similar to contract work that is temporary; the positions are not expected to be held long-term in the way that work at corporations are longer commitments. The results of this survey show that within this sample of college students, the same predictors for long-term work are applicable to this form of "alternative employment."

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

Despite the strengths of the present exploratory study, there are some limitations. One limitation is the small sample size. The total number of respondents was only 19. The survey was sent to a total of 43 individuals, representing the number of undergraduate students who worked

in the office at that time. Considering the total population of undergraduate student employees in the office, the response rate for the survey is satisfactory at about 44.2%; however, for these results to generalize to a larger population of college students working on-campus jobs, the sample size could become a limitation.

The sample also only accounts for student employees within a single office. It is possible that these participants are not representative of college student employees overall, which could also hinder the generalization of these results. The survey did not collect any identifying information from respondents, but the majority of employees within the office are White and female. Since this was the primary demographic of employees as of January 2020, the majority of the individuals recruited for the survey are likely within this group. A non-demographically representative sample could prevent generalization of the results to all college student employees.

Another potential limitation is that the survey results are not accompanied by any sort of controlled experiment. All of the trends and patterns denoted from the survey results and literature review are important because they provide useful information and lay groundwork for future studies on the population of college students working on-campus jobs. However, there is no causal relationship to be drawn from this study that, for example, college student employees definitively care most intensely about factors of affective commitment. It is important to regard the results as the product of an exploratory survey.

Future studies should focus on expanding the sample size, since that is the main limitation of this research. In expanding the sample size, it would also be beneficial to consider collecting demographic information from the sample. There may be trends based in race or gender, for example, that influence commitment in college student employees. A study exploring

organizational commitment in college student employees within numerous different offices or even at different universities would enhance the external validity of this survey. Some questions in this survey were tailored specifically to the admissions office to enhance clarity for respondents, since there is currently no measure designed specifically for young adults in this unique employment situation; developing a new, generalized measure of organizational commitment that recognizes the short-term nature of on-campus jobs could potentially impact the results significantly.

### **Conclusion**

The results of this survey suggest that student employees working on-campus jobs may experience organizational commitment in the same way that long-term workers do. They appear to respond to the same aspects of organizational commitment that have been established to be pertinent to adult employees, concluded from the strong responses given and lack of neutral choices selected. Current employees were more strongly committed than previous employees, but both groups demonstrated some amount of commitment to the organization. The results suggest that the original, established measure of organizational commitment with some modifications asks questions that are applicable to college students working on-campus jobs, despite originating from studies on adults in longer-term employment. These results can be considered and applied to universities' on-campus employment opportunities in order to better understand what components of commitment are important to students working on-campus jobs, ultimately encouraging students to return to the organization even after the semester ends.

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**Appendix**

**Figure (1):** Original questionnaire items assessing affective, continuance, and normative commitment, designed by Meyer and Allen (1990).

Affective Commitment Scale items	1. I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization
	2. I enjoy discussing my organization with people outside of it
	3. I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own
	4. I think that I could easily become as attached to another organization as I am to this one (R)
	5. I do not feel like ‘part of the family’ at my organization (R)
	6. I do not feel ‘emotionally attached’ to this organization (R)
	7. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me
	8. I do not feel a strong sense of belonging to my organization (R)
Continuance Commitment Scale items	1. I am not afraid of what might happen if I quit my job without having another one lined up (R)
	2. It would be very hard to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to
	3. Too much in my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization now
	4. It wouldn’t be too costly for me to leave my organization now (R)
	5. Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire
	6. I feel that I have too few options to consider leaving this organization
	7. One of the few serious consequences of leaving this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives
	8. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice – another organization may not match the overall benefits I have here
Normative Commitment Scale items	1. I think that people these days move from company to company too often
	2. I do not believe that a person must always be loyal to his or her organization (R)
	3. Jumping from organization to organization does not seem at all unethical to me (R)
	4. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that I believe that loyalty is important and therefore feel a sense of moral obligation to remain
	5. If I got another offer for a better job elsewhere I would not feel it was right to leave my organization
	6. I was taught to believe in the value of remaining loyal to one organization
	7. Things were better in the days when people stayed with one organization for most of their careers
	8. I do not think that wanting to be a ‘company man’ or ‘company woman’ is sensible anymore (R)

**Figure (2):** Modified questionnaire developed for current student employees.

Affective Commitment Scale items	1. When I started this position, I felt excited to come to work.
	2. I currently feel excited to work.
	3. I really feel as if this organization’s problems are my own.
	4. When working in “the J,” I feel like I am doing important work for the organization.
	5. When giving tours, I feel like I am making a difference in people’s lives.
	6. During large event days like GFTG, I personally want to create a strong guest experience.
	7. I feel like I am part of a family at this organization.
	8. I feel emotionally attached to this organization.
	9. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
	10. I feel a strong sense of belonging to this organization.
Continuance Commitment Scale items	1. It would be very hard for me to leave my job at this organization right now even if I wanted to.
	2. Too much of my life would be disrupted if I leave my organization.
	3. When working for UGA, I feel like I would rather work somewhere else. (R)
	4. I feel confident in my ability to get another job that would pay more. (R)
	5. I believe I have too few other options to consider leaving this organization.
	6. I see many negative outcomes associated with leaving UGA.
	7. I continue working here because I have formed strong relationships with my coworkers.
	8. One of the major reasons I continue to work for this organization is that leaving would require considerable personal sacrifice.
	9. I have strong mentors in this office that make me want to stay.
	10. The experience of working here is enough to justify staying with the organization.
Normative Commitment Scale items	1. I feel a sense of obligation to UGA.
	2. Even if it were to my advantage, it would not be right to leave.
	3. I would feel guilty if I left right now.
	4. UGA deserves my loyalty.
	5. UGA has been flexible with my class schedule as a student.
	6. The other employees make me feel like a valuable part of this organization.
	7. I would not leave right now due to my strong sense of obligation to UGA.
	8. I owe a great deal to this organization.
	9. My boss makes me feel like if a better opportunity came along, I could leave on good terms.
	10. I feel there are better opportunities available and I choose to stay with UGA.

**Figure (3):** Modified questionnaire developed for previous students.

Affective Commitment Scale items	1. When I started this position, I felt excited to come to work.
	2. In the last month of my employment with UGA, I felt excited to come to work.
	3. I really felt as if this organization’s problems are my own.
	4. When working in “the J,” I felt like I was doing important work for the organization.
	5. When giving tours, I felt like I was making a difference in people’s lives.
	6. During large event days like GFTG, I personally wanted to create a strong guest experience.
	7. I felt like I was part of a family at this organization.
	8. I felt emotionally attached to this organization.
	9. This organization has a great deal of personal meaning for me.
	10. I felt a strong sense of belonging to this organization.
Continuance Commitment Scale items	1. During my last month of employment, I felt like it would be very hard to leave my job at UGA even if I wanted to.
	2. I felt like too much of my life would be disrupted if I left UGA.
	3. When working for UGA, I felt like I would rather work somewhere else. (R)
	4. I felt confident in my ability to get another job that would pay more. (R)
	5. I believed I had too few other options to consider leaving this organization.
	6. I saw many negative outcomes associated with leaving UGA.
	7. I continued working at UGA as long as I did because I formed strong relationships with my coworkers.
	8. One of the major reasons I continued to work for UGA is that leaving would have required considerable personal sacrifice.
	9. I had strong mentors in this office that made me want to stay.
	10. The experience of working here was enough to justify staying with the organization.
Normative Commitment Scale items	1. I felt a sense of obligation to UGA.
	2. When employed by UGA, I did not feel it would be right to leave even if it was to my advantage.
	3. I believed I would feel guilty if I left UGA.
	4. UGA deserved my loyalty.
	5. UGA was flexible with my class schedule as a student.
	6. The other employees made me feel like a valuable part of this organization.
	7. I felt a strong sense of obligation to UGA and did not want to leave it.
	8. I owe a great deal to this organization.
	9. My boss made me feel like if a better opportunity came along, I could leave on good terms.
	10. I felt like there are better opportunities available and I chose to stay with UGA.