

 THE RESEARCH AGENDA

Understanding an Institution's Culture

By Candice Wilson-Stykes

Understanding an institution's culture helps new students develop accurate expectations for their college experience. This study explored how colleges and universities communicate their culture to students through emails. Analysis of institutional emails to incoming students uncovered taken-for-granted beliefs about the institution's culture and three themes: overemphasis, community, and commitment.

An institution's culture helps its members understand the purpose and life of the institution (Kuh and Whitt 1988). For newcomers, including incoming college students, institutional culture can establish acceptable behavior and provide a sense of group identity (Bergquist and Pawlak 2008; Kuh, *et al.* 2005).

If what students learn about the institution's culture and their role in the institution before they become official members of an institution of higher education is consistent with reality, their socialization into the organization will be affirming (Arnold, *et al.* 2015; Kuh and Whitt 1988). However, if what they learn does not align with the institution's culture, their entry into the institutional environment may be more challenging (Karp 2012). Thus, students' pre-college expectations are an important factor in their transition to college. Colleges and universities use orientations, campus visits, and admissions viewbooks to influence students' expectations of the college experience (Hite and Yearwood 2001; Mack 2010; Secore 2018). Unfortunately, many of these practices and programs do not offer a pointed overview of the institution's culture.

Research Questions

Culture is inherently difficult to identify and articulate, and institutions do not always make their culture explicit (Bergquist and Pawlak 2008; Peterson and Spencer 1990; Tierney and Lanford 2018). Problematically, it is possible institutions are not communicating their culture to incoming students at all or in the ways in which they intend to communicate it. To address this problem, this study was designed to explore the ways colleges and universities communicate institutional culture to new students. The following research questions were used to evaluate emails to accepted students:

- **RQ1:** What aspects of institutional culture (artifacts, beliefs and values, and underlying assumptions) are conveyed in the university's email messages to incoming accepted students?
- **RQ2:** In what ways are these aspects of institutional culture represented in the university's email messages to incoming students?

Significance of Study

By focusing on institutional processes and not the student experience, this study addresses a critique that student success research does not give sufficient weight to institutions' responsibility for student success (Ben-simon 2007; Museus 2014). As researchers have noted, campus structures both support and hamper student success efforts (Berger 2001; Museus, Yi, and Seulas 2017). This study helps to fill a gap by exploring how institutions can directly impact students' success.

Literature Review

Extant literature outlines three mechanisms organizations use to help newcomers understand organizational culture. Context and timing are two additional factors that impact these mechanisms.

Verbal and written discourse are overt ways organizations communicate their culture and develop cultural understanding (Knapp, Stohl, and Reardon 1981; Orrego Dunleavy and Yang 2015; Wang 2012). For example, Wang (2012) found that memorable verbal messages outlined the function of a college education for first-generation college students. Through an analysis of college admissions viewbooks, a type of written discourse, Hartley and Morphey (2008) demonstrated that institutions sent a conformist message to students that "we exist to serve you" (688). Hartley and Morphey (2008) judged this message to be problematic because it did not adequately prepare students for collegiate culture and expectations.

Informal (unplanned) and formal (intentionally designed) interactions provide cultural learning opportunities for newcomers. Informal interactions can create a familial, supportive atmosphere that facilitates learning and decreases confusion, outcomes that are especially salient for groups who have been historically marginalized in higher education (Baker 2020; Jara-Pazmino, *et al.* 2017). Duncheon (2020) deduced that pre-college programs, an example of formal interaction, effectively helped students learn academic expectations and navigate the student-professor dynamic through interactions with professors, thus jumpstarting their learning about an institution's culture.

Organizations also use learning spaces to educate and actively engage newcomers in the organizational culture. In addition to orientations, researchers have acknowledged summer bridge programs as authentic contexts in which students learn about institutional culture. (Harper and Newman 2016; O'Shea and Vincent 2011).

The impact of these three mechanisms is influenced by context and timing. Fleming and colleagues (2016) found that organizational contexts characterized by newcomer satisfaction were able to successfully integrate newcomers who were hesitant to become a part of the organization. In contrast, researchers have concluded that organizations with closed, unsupportive cultures tend to limit newcomers' socialization and are perceived as conflict-ridden and overbearing (Gundry and Rousseau 1994; Fleming, *et al.* 2016).

Researchers have advanced that teaching newcomers about an organization early on has the most memorable and positive results (Barge and Schlueter 2004; Wang 2012). Wang (2012) determined that positive messages about critical aspects of a college's culture happened early in students' college experiences.

Overall, researchers have focused on mechanisms with a social dynamic. However, many prospective college students use websites and emails to find information about institutions of higher education (National Research Center for College and University Admissions 2019). Furthermore, email is the official means of communication for many institutions of higher education. When major educational consulting organizations have tackled the issue of email communications, they have largely focused on enrollment and recruitment (Coen 2015; Miars and Yi 2020). Given the essential use of email in institutions of higher education, studying the role of email in communicating culture is vital.

Conceptual Framework

The construct of organizational culture was employed as this study's conceptual framework to understand how institutions use emails to communicate their culture to new students. Institutional culture is defined as a sub-type of organizational culture specific to institutions of higher education.

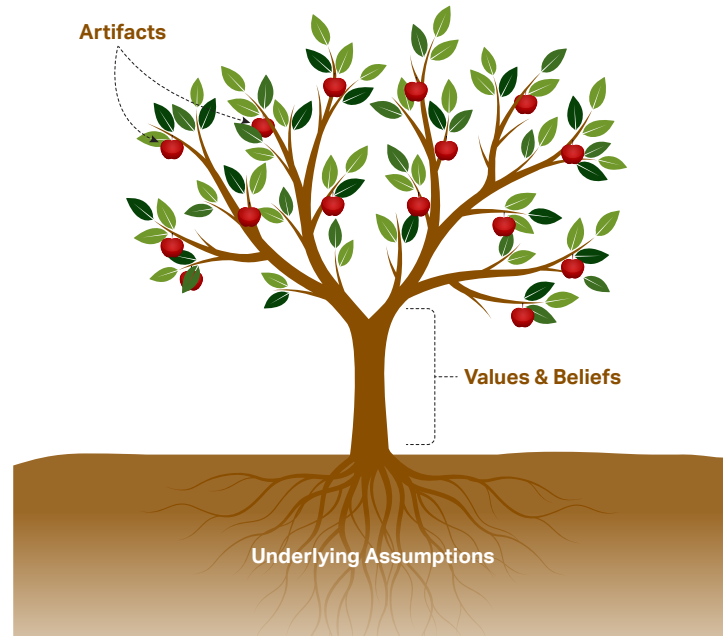


FIGURE 1 ► A Conceptual Framework of Institutional Culture

Adapted from Peterson and Spencer's (1990) conceptual model of organizational culture and van der Westhuizen, et al.'s (2005) model of effective organizational culture.

Institutional Culture

Institutional culture has three components: (1) the implicit values, beliefs, norms, and assumptions that shape institutional activity; (2) practices and patterns of institutional activity that manifest the implicit components of culture; and (3) a framework that helps researchers and institutional members make meaning of the purpose and roles in an organization and to ascertain what is significant to the institution (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Tierney 1988; Bergquist and Pawlak 2008). Institutional culture enables members of an institution to a) understand an institution's purpose and activities, b) make meaning of institutional expectations and enact appropriate behavior, c) create an institutional identity, and d) achieve success in the institution (Bergquist and Pawlak 2008; Peterson and Spencer 1990). Institutional culture impacts member commitment or, in the case of students, student persistence and retention (Kuh 2001; Masland 1985).

Levels of Culture

Schein (2010) proposed three levels of culture that facilitate cultural analysis: artifacts; espoused and embedded

values and beliefs; and underlying assumptions. The three levels of culture are represented in Figure 1.

Artifacts

Artifacts are symbols that denote value. Like fruit on a tree, they are concrete, practical, and easily recognized by institutional members and outsiders (Masland 1985). Examples of artifacts are stories, celebrations, physical spaces, rewards and punishments, systems of language, and organizational structures (Masland 1985; Peterson and Spencer 1990; Schein 2010). Before they have matriculated onto their campuses, incoming students may not experience some easy-to-identify artifacts like campus traditions, but they do receive instructions on guidelines and procedures that must be followed and hear about institutional rituals or ceremonies they will experience.

Culture is context-bound, so the meaning and value of an institutional artifact—a campus tradition, for instance—may not be fully understood outside of the institution; it may only make sense when it is attached to the institution's culture (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Tierney 1988).

Beliefs and Values

Embedded beliefs and values guide the responses and activity of institutional members. Mission statements and statements that explain how things should be as well as asking why an organization engages in certain activities reveal this level of culture (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Peterson and Spencer 1990; Schein 2010). Like the branches and trunk of a tree, beliefs and values contribute to the stability of culture. Because culture is stable, it provides a sense of group identity and predictability, and it is hard to change (Kuh and Whitt 1988; Schein 2010).

Importantly, some values and beliefs are only espoused; they represent the institutional ideal, not institutional reality (Peterson and Spencer 1990; Schein 2010). They operate like vines on a tree because they may seem integral to an institution's culture when they are not. Espoused values and beliefs may contradict institutional activity.

Underlying Assumptions

Underlying assumptions are taken-for-granted beliefs that guide institutional action. Like the roots of a tree, they are generally hidden. Underlying assumptions are ascertained by asking how artifacts and beliefs and values are connected (Schein 2010).

In conclusion, all three levels of culture are connected and necessary parts of a whole. Institutions may not be simple or well-ordered, but their cultures provide the order and stability necessary for members and the institution.

Methodology

The study site was Competitive University (CU), a public institution of higher education located in an urban area in the Southwest. In the fall of 2021, CU enrolled more than 45,000 students, mostly undergraduates. With a highly diverse student body, CU has been designated as a Hispanic-Serving Institution and an Asian American and Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution.

The primary data source was fifteen institutional emails. Data from CU's Division of Enrollment Management were used since enrollment management units typically focus on student recruitment and retention,

activities that explicitly attempt to introduce incoming students to the institution and its culture (Komives, *et al.* 2003). The emails were sent to incoming first-year students between when each student was admitted to the institution and when each student attended new student orientation. Additional data sources were the mission, vision, purpose, values, and objectives statements from the institution, division, and department websites. To prepare for the study, the researcher conducted one informational group interview with two institutional representatives who created and managed the division's communication plan for accepted students.

All the email messages, website text, and the interview transcript were analyzed using ethnographic content analysis (ECA). ECA is "used to document and understand the communication of meaning, as well as to verify theoretical relationships" (Altheide 1987, 68). ECA follows an iterative process; it uses a protocol that is specific to each study and that is developed and refined through each stage (Altheide 1987).

Trustworthiness was established through triangulation of multiple data sources, constant comparison, and member checking.

Findings

After providing an overview of the informational group interview to establish context for the emails, the findings of this study will be presented in two categories: underlying assumptions and themes.

Informational Group Interview

To become familiar with how the data were created, the researcher organized a group interview with two institutional agents from the communication arm of CU's Division of Enrollment Management. The interviewees, who will be referred to as Dave and Laurie, provided insight into the history of the email communication plan, the rationale of its components, and the institution's description of the incoming student audience.

History

CU's Division of Enrollment Management had recently implemented a new client relationship management

TABLE 1 ► Factors Leading to the Underlying Assumption that “Application and Admission Are Not Sufficient to Demonstrate That a Student Has Chosen to Attend the Institution”

Email	Artifact	Embedded/Espoused Values and Beliefs
3, 6, 7, 10, 11, 14, 15	New Student Orientation	► “...make it official by registering for New Student Orientation.” ► “Pat yourself on the back because you’re one step closer to being a CU student.” ► “Follow these steps and you’ll be officially official!”
4, 9, 11	Official Admitted Student Event Series— Hot Topics (campus life)	► “We know that choosing a college can be stressful... That’s why we’ve put together an [Official Admitted Student Event Series] to help you connect with CU!”

(CRM) tool, which allowed for a more complex system of communication. With the new CRM tool, the division was able to create “nicer templates,” develop communications campaigns, and automate communication.

Rationale

For email communications that targeted admitted students, the division’s communication department set several goals: “being relational and building rapport with students,” getting students to register for orientation and register for classes, establishing students’ belonging and fit, acculturating students to the campus, and “converting” students, *e.g.* ensuring admitted students followed through with their acceptance and attend CU.

Student Audience

Dave and Laurie described their target student demographic as aged 18-24 for first-time freshman and 22-24 for transfer students. They described the students as “socially responsible,” “purpose-driven,” “culturally open,” “cost-conscious,” and “technology expectant.” Laurie remarked that the students valued “authenticity...they don’t want to be sold or marketed to.” Dave and Laurie shared that they sought to serve this student audience with the view that “we can take any and all students and their goals and wants and needs out of the institution and provide that to them.”

At the conclusion of the interview, Dave and Laurie shared that they hoped the emails made “a difference toward [students] deciding to come to the university, whether that’s doing the call to action or just slowly building affinity and a relationship.”

Underlying Assumptions

The underlying assumptions manifested through the interplay between the artifacts and values and beliefs present in the emails; these two components of institutional culture were supported by the other documents that were used for data collection. Three of the underlying assumptions will be reviewed.

Application and Admission Are Not Sufficient to Demonstrate That a Student Has Chosen to Attend the Institution

Table 1 lists the artifacts connected to the first underlying assumption. The artifact of new student orientation was consistently associated with the belief that registering for orientation signified students’ commitment to the institution: “It’s your way of telling us you’re all in” (email 7). The institution also offered an “official” event series designed exclusively for admitted students. A major goal of the event series was that students would “connect” with CU so they would attend CU (email 9). These beliefs suggested an underlying assumption that students are not official members of the institution upon admittance to the institution. Application and admission are not sufficient to demonstrate that a student has chosen to attend the institution.

Admitted Students Become Official Members of the Institution Only After Demonstrating Their Commitment to the Institution

Because application and admission were not sufficient to make students “official” members of the institution, the institution required additional commitments from admitted students. Pre-orientation modules and

TABLE 2A ► Factors Leading to the Underlying Assumption that “Admitted Students Become Official Members of the Institution Only After Demonstrating Their Commitment to the Institution”

Email	Artifact	Embedded/Espoused Values and Beliefs
6, 12, 13, 14	Pre-Orientation Modules	► “Complete Pre-Orientation modules before your Orientation.” ► “Pat yourself on the back because you’re one step closer to being a [CU] student.”

TABLE 2B ► Factors Leading to the Underlying Assumption that “Registering for Classes Is a Privilege of the Committed, So Students Must Demonstrate Commitment to the Institution Before Registering”

Email	Artifact	Embedded/Espoused Values and Beliefs
6, 7	Registering for Classes	► “Register for courses” is the last item in the checklist.

registering for classes were two artifacts that allowed students to demonstrate their commitment; these artifacts are presented in Tables 2a and 2b. “Pre-orientation modules” were designed to help students prepare for orientation; they underscored that preparation was an important value for the institution. Additionally, by completing the pre-orientation modules, students were “one step closer” to being a student of the institution, to being “official” (email 14). This rationale seems to affirm the belief that admitted students are not official members of the institution and point to a value in creating steps for students to demonstrate their commitment to the institution. A second underlying assumption connected to the pre-orientation artifacts is that admitted students become official members of the institution only after demonstrating their commitment.

Registering for classes was mentioned in two emails. It was described as an activity reserved for committed students since students could only register after completing all other commitment tasks. Registration connected to another underlying assumption: registering for classes is a privilege of the committed, so students must demonstrate commitment to the institution before registering.

Email Is the Primary Method of Communication

As shown in Table 3 (on page 21), about half of the emails provided contact information; most emails included an email address, but one had a phone number as well. The contact information was almost always introduced as a way for students to ask questions. The artifact of email addresses demonstrates that the institution valued engagement with students through answering questions and that the institution saw asking questions as the predominant type of communication students should have with the institution. Family and supporters are also encouraged to use email to stay informed. The underlying assumption related to emails is that email is the institution’s primary, official method of communicating with admitted students.

Themes

The emails revealed three themes: overemphasis, commitment, and community.

Overemphasis

Emphasis showed what was significant to CU, but components of its culture were emphasized at different levels. CU used competition and holds to emphasize what was significant to the institution.

TABLE 3 ► Factors Leading to the Underlying Assumption that “Email is the Primary Method of Communication”

Email	Artifact	Embedded/Espoused Values and Beliefs
2	admissions@cu.edu	► “If you have any questions, reach out at [admissions@uh.edu...”
4	vc@cu.edu	► “Questions? Don’t hesitate to contact us at...”
5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 15	orientation@cu.edu	► “If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact us at [orientation@cu.edu].” ► “If you have any questions about your next steps, please don’t hesitate to contact us at [orientation@cu.edu].” ► “As always, email us at [orientation@cu.edu] with any questions.”
14	Email	► Way to stay informed ► “Continue to check your email for opportunities and events to learn more about starting at CU.”

CU strove to increase its prestige and rankings, so its admissions strategy included attracting more academically competitive students. As part of this strategy, CU’s emails highlighted several artifacts that pointed to CU’s standing: national rankings, Carnegie designation, and national sporting wins. However, emails with artifacts related to institutional values regarding education, research, service, and innovation were lacking. In the preliminary emails students received, all aspects of the mission did not receive equal weight; some were not mentioned at all, and some were only mentioned in passing. The treatment of these components of the mission could be an oversight. It could also indicate that the institutional leadership did not clearly communicate its values or, more cynically, that certain values of the institution were espoused, not embedded.

Holds (flags that are placed on a student’s account to prevent a student from doing something until some other action is completed) conveyed necessity: it was necessary that students attained certain knowledge before meeting important milestones like orientation, registration, and advising. While these holds could also be barriers to completion, they provided the institution with assurance of a student’s progress and commitment to attending CU.

However, according to the emails, many activities that dealt with students’ personal and academic suc-

cess were hold-free. There were no holds connected to the Virtual Resource Fair, an optional component of new student orientation, or to ensuring students used an “app designed to support on-time graduation.” Holds were used to control student behavior and ensure students attended new student orientation; holds also conveyed division-level cultural perspectives about which student action items were truly necessary.

Commitment

CU understood that admitted students had several attractive options in its region, so many of the initial emails asked students to complete tasks to demonstrate their commitment to attending CU.

However, the emails contained no explicit conversation about the institution’s commitment to the student. The emails enthusiastically and repeatedly mentioned resources CU provided to support students, like event series, campus tours, and of course, new student orientation. However, these resources were discussed passively; CU did not describe any actions it took to ensure students took advantage of these resources or understood their value. CU had no burden to explicitly articulate its commitment to the students. Commitment was portrayed as a characteristic and action that applied to students, not institutions; it was not reciprocated in their relationship.

Community

At CU, one goal was to use the emails to invite students into a supportive environment and to develop students' sense of belonging. The group interview participants articulated that themes of belonging and fit were woven into the email communication plan, and the emails were full of language affirming these values.

However, interspersed in the welcoming, community-affirming language were statements indicating that admitted students were not yet members of the community. Several emails include the line, "We can't wait to have you as an official member of the [CU] family." The unofficial nature of students' membership in the institutional family was connected to the checklist of commitment tasks. Until the students completed these tasks, full membership at CU remained elusive. The interview participants mentioned this phenomenon in part when they noted one of the goals of the emails was that students who are already admitted but still considering their options would decide to attend CU. This incomplete acceptance was a manifestation of tension between 1) values related to student belonging and 2) marketing strategies to confirm that admitted students would follow through with attendance.

Discussion

The underlying assumptions extend the findings of prior research on communicating culture through discourse, and they affirm the role of email communication in cultural communication (Knapp, *et al.* 1981; Orrego Dunleavy and Yang 2015). Researchers have established that organizations use verbal and written discourse to communicate their culture to newcomers and to develop cultural understanding, though they have placed more emphasis on verbal discourse (Barge and Schlueter 2004; Wang 2012). In one study of written discourse in the higher education context, Hartley and Morphew (2008) determined that written communication through admissions viewbooks was misleading. Based on the findings of this study, "misleading" may not be the correct term for all institutions. Rather, in the case of CU, these contradictions point to the complexity and nuance of institutional culture, validate the

existence of espoused versus embedded values and beliefs, and suggest the presence of subcultures.

The findings produced three overarching themes: overemphasis, commitment, and community. CU's overemphasis of values related to competition demonstrates how the competitive nature of higher education can compromise student success values and efforts. While the group interview participants and the institution, division, and department-level mission and vision statements emphasized helping students succeed, the emails contradicted this emphasis with an alternate focus on increasing institutional prestige.

Many writers have lamented the higher education rankings game and highlighted the arbitrary nature of prestige indicators, measurement concerns, and subjective methodologies (Anderson 2013; Kim 2018). However, scholars have also established that an increase in prestige allows institutions of higher education to accrue resources and capital, including students (Berger 2000; Kim 2018). As demonstrated in this study, CU emphasized its prestige to attract more prestigious, "academically competitive" students. Unfortunately, this emphasis seemed to come at the expense of student success-focused aims and of other institutional values and goals. The way CU internalized competition may be unique to CU, but it is a caution to institutions about how they engage in the rankings game. This study suggests a preoccupation with prestige can thwart efforts to help students transition to and succeed in college.

The second theme, which centered on the unequal burden of commitment, magnifies this study's significance. While the group interview participants articulated their responsibility to ensure students' success, the emails only revealed student burdens. The findings of this study suggest that CU did not attach its responsibility to demonstrative action, suggesting the researchers and practitioners alike are insufficiently addressing institutional responsibility for student success (Bensimon 2007; Museus 2014).

The final theme, community, connects to the role of organizational context. According to previous studies, an organization's context shapes the process and impact of developing cultural understanding (Gundry

and Rousseau 1994; Fleming, *et al.* 2016). At CU, institutional agents intended to display a supportive environment and to highlight their value of developing students' sense of belonging, but the emails included student tasks that created distance between admitted students and the institution. The emails communicated a tenuously supportive institutional context that could have overshadowed truly supportive aspects of the institution's cultural context.

Limitations

One limitation of this research was the sample size. The research design included only a sample of emails meeting specific criteria, but the sample was much smaller than expected. Promisingly, CU's enrollment management communication staff enthusiastically affirmed the relevance of the findings and their power to explain the inner workings of the institution's culture. A more robust sample size would further confirm the significance and applicability of this research to other institutions and functional areas.

In addition to being small, the sample was taken from one division at CU. It was not the researcher's intent to do a comparative analysis across divisions, but without the ability to compare divisions, there are some elements of a subculture that may not have been apparent through the analysis of the data.

Finally, ECA relies on the individual researcher to draw themes from the data, so the researcher is another limitation of this study. The researcher sought to examine any bias from preconceived notions and personal experience and established trustworthiness checks through triangulation and member checking. Despite these strategies, data analysis was still influenced by the researcher's identity and prior experiences in higher education.

Implications

As one of the few studies on the communication of institutional culture through written discourse, the robust findings of this study should encourage researchers and practitioners alike to expand this line of inquiry.

An implication of the findings of this study is practitioners should evaluate the balance of burden between student and institution. While Dave and Laurie articulated their responsibility to ensure students' success in the group interview, the emails only revealed student burdens; the burdens to act and to demonstrate commitment were on the student. In response to the potential for imbalance, practitioners and departments should reflect on their assumptions about student and institutional responsibility and evaluate if aspects of their institution's culture may undermine efforts to partner with students for their success.

A final implication relates to metrics of success. According to Shapiro and Dunder (2014), "institutional success and student success are increasingly different concepts" (252). This difference created tension as CU tried to balance institutional recruitment goals and student belonging goals and through the overemphasis of certain components of CU's culture; this tension manifested in an incomplete acceptance that was relayed in the emails. However, in the enrollment management sphere, sacrificing goals related to students' college experience need not be inevitable, especially since enrollment management is concerned with both recruitment and retention goals (Hossler 2014). Relieving this tension requires a tenacious commitment to do so, especially in the competitive landscape of higher education.

Conclusion

Institutions of higher education have developed a plethora of initiatives to support student success: retention offices, success coaches, updated advising models, etc. However, students need support even before they come to campus; they need accurate explanations of the institution's culture to prepare for their role as students. Given their early communication with prospective and newly admitted students, higher education offices that specialize in marketing, recruitment, and business processes are at the front lines of providing information about institutional culture. Intentionally and transparently communicating culture through email should be an essential goal when these offices construct their communication plans. However, as this study has

demonstrated, institutions must also engage in reflective work to uncover contradictions within their institution's cultures, student-focused values that may be

undermined by other institutional goals, and obscured values that need to be celebrated.

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About the Author



Candice Wilson-Stykes

Candice Wilson-Stykes, Ph.D., engages in independent research projects to support institutions of higher education and their students. Her research interests are the inter-

section of institutional culture and student success, cultural capital in higher education, and academic course failure. She has also worked as a K-12 and higher education practitioner, primarily focusing on the high school to college

transition and first-year success. Dr. Wilson-Stykes received her doctorate in higher education leadership and policy studies from the University of Houston.