

TRANSITIONING FROM AN OPEN TO A CLOSED OFFICE ENVIRONMENT:

CASE STUDY OF A UNIVERSITY ADMISSIONS OFFICE

THESIS

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By

Tara Winchester

University of Minnesota Duluth

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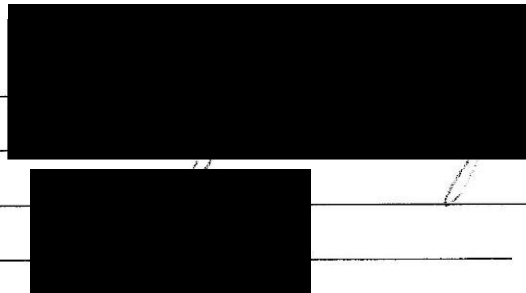
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Member

Graduate Program Director

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Abstract

This case study examined the ways in which the communication habits of a group of people (admissions counselors) in an admissions office at a university were influenced as the office's physical location transitioned from an open to a closed office environment. The participants were surveyed during the open environment and then again after the office had moved into the closed setting. This research relied heavily on participant observation before, during and after the transition. It was determined that participants in the open office setting felt more socially connected to their colleagues, less isolated, and had more opportunities to learn through observation of their peers than in the closed environment. The closed environment afforded the participants more privacy, and possibly allowed for more productivity, but ultimately they felt less connected and informed by the work of their peers. Recommendations for further research center on balancing the best of both office environments in order to gauge productivity and employee satisfaction.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

It is often espoused that "people are an organization's most important resource" yet we seldom scratch the surface into what this really means (Wenger, 1998, p. 1). Do you ever wonder how your office dynamic would change in a different physical environment? Becker and Sims (2001) "state the major reason for an office today is to bring people together: to socialize and share information; to inspire and inform each other; to provide guidance and feedback (p. 6). If socialization is at the heart of an office's purpose, why do most people say that they prefer their own private office?"

Purpose of the Study

Most colleges and universities have offices of admission where "admission officers... act as agents of the university, discerning credentials in order to make decisions that are consistent with institutional values" (Hicks & Shere, 2006, p. 45). The Admissions Office at the University of Minnesota, Morris recently moved from an open office environment to a closed office setting. The move was required because the open office setting was too small, the physical location was not ideal for campus visitors and, more generally, this space did not serve the needs of the office. The new environment was more centrally located on campus, afforded closed offices for each admissions counselor and afforded much more space for visitors and high foot traffic.

The purpose of this study was to gather admissions counselors' perceptions of office communications and interactions (among themselves) in the open setting and compare this with their perceptions of the communications and interactions in the closed setting. The study sought to determine if there was a relationship between the

communication types and frequencies in open versus closed office environments, respectively.

This study used the case study approach to qualitative inquiry. This approach was appropriate because the case to be studied was clearly bounded by time and place. This approach was justified because of the uniqueness of the specific case as it provided the researcher with the opportunity to study the same people in two different office environments. This study may be categorized as a one group, pre-test/post-test design because it "includes a pre-test measure followed by a treatment and a post-test for a single group" (Creswell, 2009, p. 160). In part, it consisted of two web-based, cross-sectional, questionnaires; one administered before the office move and the second two months after the move. The first questionnaire asked respondents to identify types and frequency of communications between admissions counselors in the open environment and the second did so for the closed office environment. Also, this study included the researcher's journal notes and observations of the communications and interactions in both settings.

The population and sample were admissions counselors in one admissions office at a small liberal arts college in the upper Midwest and was numerically, six subjects. They ranged in age between 23-31 years old. The study was conducted at the place of work and took place during work hours. Because the researcher is an admissions counselor in the office of admissions being studied, issues of "backyard" research have been considered and the following steps have been taken to minimize concerns; all methods of data collection allowed respondents to remain anonymous and untraceable and the questionnaires were not completed in the presence of the researcher.

Research Questions and Hypothesis

How did the types and frequency of communications among admissions counselors differ from the open to closed office environment? It was hypothesized that the type and frequency of communications/interactions among admissions counselors would differ between the open and closed office environments. Furthermore, it was predicted that admissions counselors would notice the ways in which they learned from their colleagues would differ between the two environments.

Significance of the Study

The significance of this research was that it examined the same office staff in both environments. The staff, job duties and responsibilities, organizational structure all remained the same; only the environment changed. This was a unique opportunity because the location and environment change was the only variable.

Setting

Since this study was predicated upon an office location change, there were two settings. The first was the admissions office in the open office environment in Behmler Hall and the second was the same office in the closed/private office environment in a building called the Welcome Center. Behmler Hall was structured such that all of the admissions counselors except one sat in a space of about 238 square feet, with their backs to each other, facing a wall, surrounded part way by a cubicle panel that could not be looked over while sitting. That said, each counselor could easily turn around and see at least two other counselors' work stations. The closed office environment in the Welcome Center was one in which each counselor has their own private office, 112 feet squared, complete with a lockable door.

Limitations and Assumptions

I will be starting my fifth year as an Admissions Counselor at the institution under study and therefore I have many experiences that I brought to the study. I am well aware of the issues involving backyard research and I did what was necessary to ensure reader confidence in the findings.

This study had definite limitations with regard to the ability to generalize these findings to other professions. This study was conducted on the premise of a small, liberal arts university and may not even be generalizable within the admissions professions of institutions dissimilar to this one. Due to the unique characteristics of the admissions counseling profession, the small sample size, and the case study approach to inquiry, the results could not be easily generalized.

Definitions

- Open Office -- a work space in which workers can either clearly see each other while working, clearly hear phone and in-person conversations of their office mates or both - where noise, interruptions and distractions are out of the control of the inhabitant.
- Closed Office -- an environment in which noise, interruptions and distractions may be controlled by the office inhabitant.
- Admissions Counselor - a person who works in an admissions office whose primary role is to recruit students to a particular institution by working with prospective students and their families throughout the college search process. Their job duties range from institution to institution but, for the purposes of this study, include: working with students, families and guidance counselors,

scheduling and running a student's campus visit, admission application review, attending college fairs, managing certain geographical territories for recruitment purposes, and generally making sure the student's transition from high school to college runs smoothly and efficiently.

- Behmler Hall - the admissions office's physical location until January 2010, it is described as an open office environment.
- Welcome Center - the admissions office's physical location after January 2010, it is described as a closed office environment.

Summary

In summary, this qualitative study consisted of two questionnaires to the admissions counselors and the journal entries and observations of the researcher. It took place in two settings, an open and closed office environment. It was anticipated that the communication habits and interactions (among admissions counselors) would differ from the open to the closed office environment.

CHAPTER TWO

Review of the Literature

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to examine the communication habits and interactions among admissions counselors in both an open and closed office environment. This literature review provided insights from a wide range of literature based in communication and learning theory. It examined concepts in dialogue and critical reflection, tacit and explicit knowledge, social learning, open and closed office environments, knowledge management and transfer, organizational learning, learning organizations and communities of practice, knowledge communities and work teams. The purpose of this literature review was to elaborate on concepts in communication and learning theory in order to inform a case study exploring these concepts and their connection to open versus closed office environments.

Tacit and Explicit Knowledge

Smith (2001) reported "that 90% of the knowledge in any organization is embedded and synthesized in people's heads" (as cited in Peroune, 2007, p. 244). This knowledge, often referred to as tacit knowledge was one of two types of knowledge commonly discussed; the other type was explicit knowledge. Explicit knowledge has been described as the "know-what" where tacit knowledge may be thought of as "know-how" (Brown & Duguid, 1998). E. Smith (2001) described explicit knowledge as "logical," "based on facts" and "readily communicated and shared through print, electronic methods and other formal means" (p.315). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) explained tacit knowledge as "personal, context specific and therefore hard to formalize and communicate" (as cited in Mooradian, 2005, p. 105). Polanyi (1967) used the

examples of riding a bike or recognizing a person in a crowd to describe the subjectivity of tacit knowledge. Tacit knowledge also "tends to be local ... not found in manuals, books, databases or files" and is composed of "values, beliefs, perceptions, insights and assumptions" (E. Smith, 2001, p. 314). Smith (2001) concluded that "organizations that recognize and use their employees' steadily growing wealth of tacit and explicit knowledge to solve problems and achieve goals have a major competitive advantage" (p. 319). Peroune (2007) wrote that tacit knowledge is a key resource that is not readily available to the organization and the conversion of knowledge from tacit to explicit is, in effect, converting knowledge from the individual to the organization

Learning Through Dialogue and Reflection

In Bohm's (2004) concept of Dialogue, people suspended their assumptions and sought collective communication through shared meaning. As Shor (1992) stated:

Dialogue is a capacity and inclination of human beings to reflect together on the meaning of their experience and their knowledge. Dialogue, then, can be thought of as the threads of communication that bind people together and prepare them for reflective action. Dialogue links people together through discourse and links their moments of reflection to their moments of action. (p. 86)

Bohm (2004) described dialogue and how important it was to be keenly aware of our assumptions while learning. People were only able to make something in common if they are "creating something new together" (p. 3). This may only happen if "people are able freely to listen to each other, without prejudice, without trying to influence each other. Each have to be interested primarily in truth and coherence, so that he is ready to drop his old ideas and intentions, and be ready to go on to something different, when it is

called for" (p. 3). The point was that dialogue has to attend to "all the pressures that are behind our assumptions. It goes into the process of thought *behind* the assumptions, not just the assumptions themselves" (p. 9). Bohm's concept of dialogue was important to understand when considering the ways in which people learn and understand their world. In sum, Bohm stated that dialogue,

...is necessary to share meaning. A society is a link of relationships among people and institutions, so that we can live together. But it only works if we have a *culture* - which implies that we share meaning; i.e. significance, purpose, and value. Otherwise, it falls apart ... the different assumptions that people have are *tacitly* affecting the whole meaning of what we are doing. (p. 22)

The value and necessity of dialogue and reflection for learning environments was a powerful undertone in much of the learning theory literature. Raelin (1997) asserted that reflection is a necessary component of learning at the individual level. Argyris (1991) wrote, "if learning is to persist, managers and employees must also look inward. They need to reflect critically on their own behavior, identify the ways they often inadvertently contribute to the organization's problems, and then change how they act" (p. 4).

Mezirow's (1991) theory of transformative learning included critical reflection as a necessary component of transforming one's perspective. Schon (1983) wrote, "our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patterns of action and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is *in* our action." (p. 49). Smith (2001a) offered an articulation of this concept of reflective practice: "it involves looking to our experiences, connecting with our feelings, and attending to our theories in use. It entails building new understandings to inform our actions in the

situation that is unfolding" (The Reflective Practitioner section, para. 2). Hardin-Herrgard (2000) discussed the importance of reflection, experiences and time in order to develop tacit knowledge and stated, "more pressure on employees and shorter employments in working life today raises a risk that employees therefore do not have sufficient time to attain tacitness in their knowledge" (p. 362). Dialogue and reflection are mainstays in the field of adult learning and must be included in any discussion where adult learning is the focus.

Social Learning and Office Community

"There can be no community without communication" (Seaman, 2008, p. 272). Collective learning is described as a social event. Whether a group is communicating through story telling and narratives, familiar practices and assumptions or common goals and objectives, they are building community, nonetheless.

Brown and Gray (2007) argued that "learning is about work, work is about learning and they are both social" (Across the Knowledge Divide section, para. 8). They stated, "with groups, tacit knowledge exists in the distinct practices and relationships that emerge from working together over time - the social fabric that connects communities of knowledge workers" (Across the Knowledge Divide section, para. 8). Hardin-Herrgard (2000) asserted that "the most common way of sharing tacit knowledge takes place in face-to-face interaction" (p. 363). Holste and Fields (2010) found that "both warm personal relationships developed through face-to face interactions and solid respect for another worker's professional capability is required for the sharing of tacit knowledge (p. 135). Senge (1990) wrote, with inspiration from the writings of Werner Heisenberg, "collectively, we can be more insightful, more intelligent than we can possibly be

individually" (p. 239). Peroune (2007) wrote that "the elements of trust, which encourages dialogue, and expertise, which ensures that a common language is spoken, define the peer relationship" (p. 256) and furthermore, a peer relationship, "provides a safe environment for individuals to achieve a sense of expertise, equality, and empathy" (p. 245).

Open Versus Closed Office Environments

Becker and Sims (2001) stated, "the major reason for an office today is to bring people together: to socialize and share information; to inspire and inform each other; to provide guidance and feedback" (p. 6). Their research showed that open office environments are more conducive to ad hoc interaction and communication which leads to faster feedback, more opportunities to ask and answer questions, more tacit learning/sharing, and stronger social bonds between workers. Frequent criticisms of open offices were their lack of privacy, distractions, and noise. Roelofsen (2008) noted that "speech (incidental/and or formal meeting discussions, telephone conversations, etc.) form the most disturbing source of noise in an open office accommodation" (p. 204). "Open-plan and shared offices have most complaints about lack of privacy - people have difficulty concentrating, dealing with personal matters and colleagues' annoying habits" (Nathan and Doyle, 2002, p. 26). (in Haynes, 2008, p. 196).

Goh (2002) asserted that if knowledge is "in a database or someone's private knowledge domain, then the organization cannot use it to learn" (p.24). Becker and Sims (2001) wrote, "most employees ... need time to think, concentrate and reflect, as well as communicate, share information and interact socially . the Holy Grail is finding the right balance" (p. 13). Hicks and Shere (2006) confirmed that the admissions profession

does "not provide for a conducive environment for sustained reflection and robust dialogue" and imply that this limits the effectiveness of each individual admissions counselor (p. 48). One way to facilitate communication in a closed office environment may be through instant messaging technology which allows for quick back and forth communication between colleagues and can "also eliminate much of the internal churning (emails, voice mails, walks past someone's office) it takes for one employee to get information and assistance from another" (Marshak, 2004, p. 1).

Knowledge Management and Transfer

Before realizing any competitive advantage, organizations must understand the processes of managing and transferring knowledge. Liss (1999) described knowledge management (KM) as the process for determining information that could be beneficial to others in an organization and finding ways to make it easily available (as cited in E. Smith, 2001). Wah (1999) asserted that KM involves the organization of both "tangible" (explicit) and "intangible" (tacit) knowledge and then the creation of "an interactive learning environment where people readily transfer and share what they know, internalize it and apply it to create new knowledge" (The Essence section, para 1). Firestone and McElroy (2005) cautioned that "the purpose of KM is not to improve either worker effectiveness (although it may well do that) or an organization's bottom line" (p. 189). Though its purpose may technically have been focused on enhancing knowledge processing, the plethora of books, journals and published materials on knowledge management have shown that these activities have had an impact on organizational competitiveness.

Goh (2002) contended that managing intellectual capital effectively must include an examination of how knowledge is transferred between individuals and groups. Organizational culture plays a large role in the potential for effective knowledge transfer. Groups and/or individuals must be willing to share their knowledge and a culture of cooperation and collaboration must already be established. Trust is "an essential condition for a willingness to cooperate" (Goh, 2002, p. 26). Without trust, sharing best practices through processes such as information sharing and team meetings will be "marginally successful at best" (p. 26). Santo (2005) proposed that "social interactions cannot be overlooked. Though commonly dismissed as 'water cooler talk' these exchanges are necessary for building trust required to express genuine vulnerability - to admit that one needs new knowledge" (as cited in Sheehy, 2008, p. 56). Tacit knowledge may be best transferred through less structured processes such as teamwork, mentoring, group dialogue and personal reflections.

Communities of Practice, Knowledge Communities and Work Teams

Communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), knowledge communities (Craig, 1995) and work teams (McDermott, 1999) have all been recently studied and discussed in the literature as ways in which individuals share knowledge (often tacit) and learn within organizations.

According to Seaman (2008), the main goal of communities of practice (CoPs) was to collectively improve or redefine practice. This differed slightly from the main goal of knowledge communities (KCs) in that they are concerned with improving the individual practitioner's practices (not improving the collective practice). McDermott (1999) explained that work teams are more concerned with outputs and objectives than

necessarily improving practices. Members of work teams usually reported to the same boss and tended to carry out their day to day activities within close proximity of each other. Both CoPs and KCs emerged out of necessity or circumstance and came together and disbanded frequently depending on the needs of the community. Regardless of the name of the community, Por (n.d.) contended that "not having a coherent strategy of actualizing the potential of communities for value creation has become a competitive disadvantage" (p. 3).

McDermott (1999) compared and contrasted communities of practice and work teams and concluded that since they both have their benefits and drawbacks, organizations would be best served to combine them into a "Double-Knit" organization. Seaman (2008) examined the similarities and differences between communities of practice and knowledge communities and concluded that no matter what they are named, as long as there is knowledge to be shared, they will continue to thrive. Wenger and Snyder (2000) concluded that "most fields of expertise are now too complex for any one person to master and thus collective intelligence must be brought to bear to solve important problems" (as cited in Por, n.d.).

Organizational Learning and Learning Organizations

"An organization is what it knows" (E. Smith, 2001, p.320). Garvin (2000) argued that a widely agreed upon definition of organizational learning remains elusive despite the enormous amount of research around the topic (as cited in M. Smith, 2001). For the purpose of this literature review, organizational learning referred to the ways in which individual and collective learning occurred within organizations (M. Smith, 2001b). An organization learns collectively through action learning, communities of

practice and bridging the gap between theory and practice. Huber (1991) noted that it is important to broadly define organizational learning; learning in organizations may not always be intentional or increase effectiveness because "entities can incorrectly learn, and they can correctly learn that which is incorrect" (p. 89). Levitt and March (1988) contended that organizations learn from direct experience and the experience of others. Srikantia and Pasmore (1996) claimed that the balance between conviction and doubt can be a significant factor in transforming learning from individual to collective within an organization. "Lack of doubt causes complacency with the status quo, while lack of conviction results in fear and paralysis. Too much doubt erodes conviction; too much conviction eliminates doubt and its energy for exploring alternatives" (p. 42). Hong (1999) wrote that "organizational learning occurs when the individual members detect the discrepancy between actual and expected results, and try to correct the errors and challenge the underlying assumptions" (p.1).

If an organization has succeeded in applying the principles of organizational learning theory then Finger and Brand (1999) would assert that this is a sufficient, although not necessary, condition by which the organization has transformed into the ideal of a 'learning organization'. Peter Senge (1990), a key thinker in this school of thought gave this description of a learning organization,

... where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together. (p. 3)

White and Weathersby (2005) described learning organizations as having characteristics of openness, risk taking, change and flexibility. Iles (1994) suggested that integrating work and learning is critical to the development of successful, sustainable organizations. Iles' rationale for promoting learning environments was that by investing in the competency of individual employees, the organization gains a competitive advantage through the continuous improvement of their greatest resource, their employees (Schmidt, 2008). Matthews (1999) asserted that as individuals and organizations see the benefits of workplace learning they will be more committed to evolving into a learning organization. Griego, Geroy and Wright (2000) stated "whatever the argument, researchers agree that learning organizations are consequential to success" (p. 6).

Senge's (1990) *The Fifth Discipline*, on the art and practice of learning organizations, has sparked much interest in further exploration of how learning organization principles may give organizations a competitive advantage. Lee-Kelley, Blackman and Hurst (2007) studied knowledge workers in terms of "which practices and elements of learning organization models are related to voluntary turnover as mediated through job satisfaction" (p. 205). They found that "some level of relationship exists between learning organization disciplines and turnover intention" (p. 211) and adopting their suggested strategies "should lead to increased retention of knowledge workers and their knowledge" (p. 218). Griego et al., (2000) established that there are certain predictors of learning organizations. "Individuals within organizations who felt their work was appreciated, rewarded for taking chances, not punished for mistakes, and had a rewarding management system were overwhelmingly likely to define their workplace as a learning organization" (Griego et al., 2000, p. 10).

Criticisms of the Learning Organization

As the field of organizational learning has continued to expand, critics of the ideal of the 'learning organization' have emerged. Levitt and March (1988) stated that "learning does not always lead to intelligent behavior" (p. 335). Grievés (2008) asserted that the learning organization is an intangible reality because of inherent, irreconcilable flaws in the concept. Furthermore, he charged that the ideal of a learning organization is "an impracticable and unobtainable myth" and that the concept should be abandoned. Likewise, Hughes and Tight (1995) were concerned about the lack of evidence confirming that practices of learning organizations actually "create fitter and better organizations" (p. 300). The fear was that by toting the idealizations of learning organizations as the remedy for an assortment of organizational problems, real, effective solutions and progressions may be denied.

Conclusions

Research on the ways in which individuals and organizations communicate and learn is diverse and extensive. This literature review has shown that many fields and subject areas must be canvassed in order to understand how the concepts in organizational communication and learning intersect the idea of open and closed office environments. Becker and Sims (2001) wrote that an organization must find a balance of open and closed working environments in order to maximize effectiveness in terms of communication and learning at the individual and organizational level. Paying attention to the physical space of an office environment seemed to be one component of moving toward a learning organization. As for the future of learning organization research, Rowley and Gibbs (2008) suggested that moving from a learning organization toward a

"practically wise" organization may be a logical step in the evolution of discussion in this field. The excerpt below described the integration of wisdom into organizations,

The learning in a wise organization is that which is reflective as well as propositional. It does not depend exclusively on rationality or utility but on a sense of being, of making good practical judgments interpreted in the situation with the future consequence at its core. It is the ability to make "right" judgments, driven by qualities such as compassion, honesty, empathy, responsibility, or commitment. (p. 364)

Increasingly, organizations are being called to act in an ethical and sustainable manner and Rowley and Gibbs (2008) contended that incorporating philosophies of practical wisdom into a learning organization may be one way to meet these new standards.

Whether or not future research leads toward the above mentioned ideas, it seems that contributions in these fields will persist.

CHAPTER THREE

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to examine how communications among admissions counselors were affected by an office location change from an open to closed office environment. This chapter will describe the participants and setting, the development of the qualitative methods used and will conclude with the process used to gather and analyze the data.

This study used the case study approach to qualitative inquiry. Yin (2003) encouraged use of the case study approach in situations where "a 'how' or 'why' question is being asked about a contemporary set of events, over which the investigator has little or no control" (p. 9). This approach was relevant because the case to be studied was clearly bounded by time and place and was justified because of the uniqueness of the specific case as it provided the researcher with the opportunity to study the same people in two different office environments. A qualitative approach was employed "to emphasize the researcher's role as an active learner who can tell the story from the participant's view rather than as an 'expert' who passes judgment on participants" (Creswell, 1998, p. 18).

Setting and Participants

Although Yin (2003) posited that with the case study methodology it is most desirable that the identity of the case and the individuals is disclosed, the identities of the individuals, in this case, will remain anonymous. The setting for this study was the admissions office at the University of Minnesota, Morris, a small, liberal arts institution in the Midwest. Actually, there were two settings for the study because the first part of

the research concerned the "old" admissions office location in Behmler Hall and the second part was conducted in the "new" location because the admissions office moved to the Welcome Center, a newly renovated building in January 2010. These details were what this study itself is predicated upon because the environments of Behmler Hall and the Welcome Center are quite different from one another.

Access to the setting for the research was made possible through the written permission of the Director of Admissions at the institution on December 19, 2009. A copy of the text requesting access and the Director's response is available in Appendix A.

The admissions office in Behmler Hall was what may be described as an open office environment. Becker and Sims (2001) pointed out that describing an office as "open" serves little purpose as the very definition remains elusive. For the purposes of this study, the definition of "open office" was a work space in which workers can either clearly see each other while working, clearly hear phone and in-person conversations of their office mates or both - where noise, interruptions and distractions are out of the control of the inhabitant. The space occupied by the admissions counselors was, in effect, one large room where the admissions counselors all sat in very close proximity to each other. The admissions counselors' desks were partitioned by 55 inch high cubicle-like walls on the sides but the counselors sat with their backs to each other and could easily turn their heads and see at least two other counselors' work stations. Because of their close proximity to each other, it was easy to overhear phone and in-person conversations and nearly impossible not to. Each work station had their own phone line, computer, desk drawers and desktop work area and although the individual spaces varied a little in size, the individual spaces where six of the seven counselors sat were roughly

30 feet squared. The overall area of the space where six of the seven counselors sat was 238 feet squared. The seventh admissions counselor sat in what could be deemed a private office adjoining to the other six admissions counselors by a door which, unless there was a meeting, remained open much of the time. The office was comprised of one director, seven admissions counselors, and four office support staff but this study is concerned largely with the setting of the admissions counselors' work area. It should be mentioned though, that although the Director had a private office (much like the seventh admissions counselor's), the rest of the office staff were, for the most part, a part of this cubicle-like open office environment.

The new admissions counselor offices in the Welcome Center are best described as closed and private. Becker and Sims (2001) described closed offices as spaces where "it is easier to control unwanted distractions and interruptions" where professionals have "time to think, concentrate and reflect" (p. 12-13). For the purpose of this study, a "closed office" was defined as an environment in which noise, interruptions and distractions may be controlled by the office inhabitant. In the Welcome Center, the admissions counselors' offices were approximately 112 feet squared and included work station amenities such as a phone line, computer docking station with a monitor, cabinets, a large desk that is easily converted into a small meeting table that comfortably sits four adults. This meeting table in each individual office was the primary reason for the decision to have the admissions counselors in a private, closed office environment. A meeting space/office for each admissions counselor that would accommodate 3-4 adults was a crucial design element for the Welcome Center. A large part of the admissions counselor's role was to facilitate the campus visits of prospective students. During their

visit, each prospective student was, at minimum, going on a campus tour and meeting individually with an admissions counselor. On busy days, the admissions office could be hosting upwards of twenty individual students and their families and therefore this private meeting space for each group was an important, if not necessary, component of facilitating the campus visit experience. In Behmler Hall, each admissions counselor was responsible for finding their own meeting space either in their building or across campus - sometimes resulting in a walk half way across campus simply to find a place to sit down.

On January 8, 2010 the Institutional Review Board Human Subjects Committee of the University of Minnesota granted exempt status to this study under Category 2 research involving survey procedures and observation of public behavior. The approval letter may be found in Appendix B.

Participation in the study was voluntary. On January 18, 2010 initial contact with the participants was made through an email explaining the purpose of the study (Appendix C) and the participants returned an email indicating their willingness to be a part of the study. The participants in this study were the admissions counselors and were chosen as a function of their title, all participants hold the title of admissions counselor. The participants ranged in age from 23-31 years old and have worked in the admissions office for a range of years from fewer than twelve months to more than seven years. Though the office location and environment changed drastically, the office staff remained exactly the same; there were no staff changes during the transition from Behmler Hall to the Welcome Center.

The researcher's relationship to the participants was an established, professional relationship. The researcher has been an admissions counselor in this office since 2006 and therefore has had professional, working relationships with all of the participants. Creswell (2009) cautioned against research that "involves studying the researcher's own organization, friends or immediate work setting" stating that this type of research "often leads to compromises in the researcher's ability to disclose information and raises difficult power issues" (p. 177). Creswell (1998) advised that a "compelling argument" needs to be made to justify this type of research (p. 114).

The researcher believed there was such an argument for this research and that it was the uniqueness of the case study and opportunity to study the same people in drastically different environments (at the time of the office location transition) which justified and mitigated these concerns. Yin (2003) wrote that researchers may choose their case because of its uniqueness or because of the access or special arrangement of the researcher. Furthermore, because of this access and the nature of the profession, the researcher was able to gain many insights which led to inferences from observation that will be discussed later. The researcher designed the data collection methods with these concerns in mind. For example, although interviews are often a crucial aspect of case studies, they were not conducted (and instead a qualitative, anonymous, questionnaire was administered) because the researcher was concerned that with an interview the respondents may be less likely to disclose some information and opinions because interviews are not anonymous (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2007). The type of information sought in this study was such that the admissions counselors had an incentive to provide honest answers not only because their responses were anonymous but also

because the insights gleaned from the research addressed communication strategies and could potentially benefit the day-to-day admissions counselor practices in the Welcome Center. Nevertheless, the researcher was acutely aware of the concerns addressed by Creswell and others and had kept them center of mind throughout the development and implementation of the study.

Research Design

The idea and design for this case study had its roots in both the practical and theoretical. It emerged theoretically from literature on organizational learning (Argyris & Schon, 1996), learning organizations (Senge, 1990), communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983) and tacit learning (Polyani, 1967).

Practically, it came into view when it was announced that the admissions office would be moving to the Welcome Center and the decision was made to construct private offices for each admissions counselor. The idea that admissions counselors would have their own offices was novel and exciting at first but it soon became clear that this transition would be an adjustment. The study really came into focus during this period of realization.

In the summer of 2009 the researcher introduced the possibility of a case study featuring admissions counselors to the Director of Admissions. Multiple meetings and conversations between the two ensued and it was determined that this case study would not only contribute to the literature but would also have practical, professional benefits for the transition the office would make in the winter of 2010. Since then, the Director of Admissions had been helpful in offering suggestions and feedback. This rapport enriched the quality of the study and gave the researcher confidence that access to the site would not be problem.

The case study design was chosen because this methodology best fit the unique situation at hand. While it is true that case studies have several strengths and weaknesses, Cohen, Manion, & Morrison (2007) stated that a case study "provides a unique example of real people in real situations, enabling readers to understand ideas more clearly than simply by presenting them with abstract ideas or principles" (p. 253). The admissions office was a bounded system being studied in two distinct environments. Yin (2003) encouraged budding case study researchers to start small, with a case that is interesting and engaging but one that will allow the researcher to fully explore the demands, rigor and systematic procedures required for producing a successful case study.

Data Collection

Although the interview was a common, indeed almost requisite, method of data collection for a case study, no interviews were conducted for this study. The researcher used the following approaches to data collection: administration of two qualitative questionnaires and journal observations and reflections throughout the time of the study.

The questionnaires were designed much like a set of guided interview prompts or focused interview; they followed a line of inquiry (with built-in logic), asked "how" and "why" questions and openly requested the respondents' opinions and insights on the topic at hand. Furthermore, Yin (2003) suggested that a survey (or questionnaire) would provide relevant evidence to a case study when seeking insight from "workers or managers" of an organization (p. 91). The design of the qualitative, web-based, questionnaire was produced through careful consideration of the admissions counselor's daily routine and responsibilities while being grounded in case study methodology. The first questionnaire was made available to the admissions counselors on January 21, 2010,

while the admissions office was still in Behmler Hall and the second was administered nearly two months after the move to the Welcome Center on March 18, 2010. The first questionnaire measured the admissions counselor's attitude and thoughts toward the open office environment while the second measured their perceptions of the closed office environment in comparison to the open environment. The January questionnaire may be found in Appendix D and the March questionnaire in Appendix F. Because the questionnaires were web-based, the data is neatly stored and analyzable electronically. The questionnaire method was selected for two reasons. Foremost, the admissions counselor's job required travel and extended (alternative) work hours and the web-based questionnaire's versatility allowed each participant the flexibility to name the time and place to complete the questionnaire. This flexibility was important to ensure responses from each participant. Second, in light of concerns about objectivity and honesty in "backyard" research that have already been addressed, the confidentiality and anonymity of a web-based questionnaire was the preferable method for collecting qualitative data directly from the participants.

The researcher kept a journal throughout the time of the study. Its purpose was to record observations, notes and reflections at certain points throughout the time of the study. The original protocol for the journal included an entry every 2-3 days but the researcher quickly realized that this was too optimistic, there wasn't enough to write about so there ended up being about a journal entry a week. The entries themselves included anecdotes from direct observations, narrative on certain day's events or situations and reflections of the researcher's own perspective on the transition and

differences between the two office environments. The entire journal can be found in Appendix H.

Data Analysis

Multiple sources of evidence were used in this data collection process. The pre-post questionnaires provided the insight and opinions of the participants and the researcher's journal and notes often times reflected many of the sentiments expressed by the respondents in the questionnaires, thus creating what Yin (2003) describes as "converging lines of inquiry" (p. 100). The amount of direct observation time that the researcher put in the field (as a function of working within the organization) was valuable to the inferences gleaned for this study.

Themes from the questionnaires were analyzed through careful interpretation of the responses to the open-ended questions. The responses to the open-ended questions provided substantiating evidence for the themes that emerged from the other data collection methods. The data analysis was a continuous process of reflection on the existing data, interpretation and sense-making on the part of the researcher. The most obvious theme was that the open office environment provided an opportunity for admissions counselors to learn from one another through observation and listening where the closed setting took this opportunity away. All of the respondents indicated that the closed office environment did not allow them to adequately learn from their colleagues through observation. Another theme that emerged was that the closed office environment, despite its drawbacks, was much preferable to the open setting. The themes will be discussed in more detail in the final chapter.

Summary

The qualitative study may be described as a single, issue-oriented, within-site, intrinsic case study. The data collected consisted of observations, questionnaires, and journal reflections. The process for data analysis included preparing the data to be analyzed (transcribing journal entries) and a continual process of gathering data, reflecting on it, interpreting themes, identifying issues and gaining new perspectives. This process led to the results that are discussed in the following chapter.

CHAPTER FOUR

Results

The intent of this case study was to investigate communication habits among admissions counselors during a transition from an open to closed office environment. This chapter has outlined the results of this study. The results are presented in three categories; results from the January questionnaire, results from the March questionnaire and results from the researcher's journal and observations.

January Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

The full text version of this questionnaire may be found in Appendix D, the full results may be found in Appendix E. This questionnaire was administered to collect data on the admissions counselors' perceptions of the open office environment in which their offices were located during the time the questionnaire was administered. It had twelve questions, a combination of closed and open ended questions and included a number of questions that requested an extended answer. Since this study was qualitative in nature and interviews were not a method of data collection, the questionnaire served as a way to collect data of the qualitative nature. This case study had six participants and all six responded to the January questionnaire. Half of the respondents indicated that they had worked in the admissions field for fewer than eighteen months and the other half responded that they had worked in the field for more than eighteen months.

The respondents were asked how frequently (per day) they engaged in different types of communication such as informal and formal face to face conversations, email, phone and instant message conversations. The data showed that the most frequent type of communication in the open office environment was informal face to face conversations

and most respondents indicated that these conversations lasted fewer than five minutes. The least frequent type was instant message/chat where all respondents answered that they never communicated with their colleagues in this manner.

All six of the respondents either agreed or somewhat agreed with the statement "the open office environment provides me the opportunity to frequently learn from my fellow admissions counselors by observing (watching/hearing) their behavior." When asked to describe the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with this statement many of the responses emphasized how strongly they agreed by writing such statements as,

In this setting I am able to observe what types of conversations are had and not had, the type of information shared and how it is shared... over the phone and in person in the office. ... these experiences were VITAL in my ability to do my job as well as I do today. I was able to ask questions about things I overheard and model some of my professional behavior/ interactions after more experienced counselors. It was also an opportunity for other counselors to hear my conversations/ interactions and make suggestions or corrections.

It was also clear from the responses that the open office environment continued to provide counselors with opportunities to learn from each other even after they felt that they were "trained in" on the job. Through observations and face to face interactions such as these, admissions counselors were able to learn some of the tacit knowledge that is required in order to be an effective admissions counselor.

All of the respondents indicated that they believed the ways in which they communicated with their fellow admissions counselors would change once they moved into Thomas Hall. When asked to describe their predictions they wrote,

... there will be less face to face communication ... and more email interaction, I may use an instant messenger of some sort, our communications among each other may become less personable, the ability to ask questions with other counselors will be greatly limited, the learning curve for new counselors will be extended ... it will be much more difficult to pick up on the actions of experienced staff, informal conversations ... may not always pertain to work (but) they do help maintain a stronger work environment ... as it helps new staff learn where other staff members fall in terms of issues involving work and admissions practice.

The final question asked the respondents to identify both the benefits and drawbacks of the open office environment in their own words. Some examples of the admissions counselors' perceptions of the benefits of the open office environment are

- keeping track of what other counselors are doing/saying, observing peers;
- opportunity to ask questions immediately and to a group of people, not just one person;
- unprompted feedback from peers;
- learning from each other by listening to other counselors;
- ability to bounce ideas off of a group which leads to great ideas and fruitful conversation;
- immediate access to a colleague who may be able to answer a question - no waiting for answers/advice; and
- increased job enjoyment by allowing for little breaks to catch up and socialize - which ultimately boosts productivity.

Some examples of the admissions counselors' perceptions of the drawbacks of the open office environment are

- informal workspace - sometimes hard to gauge if an interaction is personal/professional;
- hard to make phone calls when others are listening or if the matter of the call is sensitive;
- hard to focus with all of the background noise;
- difficult to hear on the phone when office mates are talking/background noise;
- impossible to have private conversations;
- too many interruptions/distractions;
- inability to receive feedback from just one person - the whole group always offers their opinion and that can be overwhelming; and a
- lack of privacy.

March Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

The full text of the questionnaire may be found in Appendix F, the full results may be found in Appendix G. The March questionnaire was similar in style and substance to the January questionnaire. This questionnaire was administered in order to collect data on the admissions counselors' perceptions of the closed office environment in which their offices were located during the time the questionnaire was administered. It had eleven questions which were a combination of open and closed ended, and a number that requested an extended answer. This case study had six participants and all six responded to the March questionnaire.

Five of the six respondents indicated that they used email very often or often to communicate with other admissions counselors. Informal face to face conversations and email were the two most frequent methods of communications among admissions counselors in the closed office environment. While the average informal face to face conversation was 3-5 minutes or more than 5 minutes in length, five of the six respondents indicated their average phone conversation lasted for fewer than 2 minutes.

All respondents indicated that they disagree or somewhat disagree with the statement that the closed office environment provides them opportunities to frequently learn from their colleagues through observation. Some of the anecdotes they provided were, *I almost never get to see or hear the counselors while they are working, it's hard to keep track of what others are doing/saying, informal learning opportunities have been significantly reduced*, as well as opportunities for observation.

The counselors described how the ways in which they communicate with their colleagues have changed since moving into the Welcome Center by stating, *communicate less with other admissions counselors, I discuss... problems that I encounter throughout the day less because other counselors are not as easily accessible, communication in the closed office setting is a much more deliberate act, I'm less likely to ask opinions or for help*. One counselor put their response eloquently,

I have to set aside time to purposefully seek out colleagues with the goal of simply just talking. This poses a challenge as it's hard to know when people are in the middle of something or if it's a good time to chat. The old environment, while quite challenging for many reasons, did provide an environment in which it was easier to communicate with other counselors. Another area regarding changed

communications ... is that the ease in which counselors only speak with close friends/people they agree with has significantly increased. The danger is that small groups of counselors align with certain views/opinions that are different than other staffmembers. While this is probably inevitable in any work environment, the level that this selfsegregation can reach is greater than that in our previous open environment.

Each respondent was asked to describe the benefits of the closed office environment and they did so with comments such as, *I am more productive in a work day because I am able to sit in a quiet space and work (almost) uninterrupted, and ... more productive in my work day. I also find myself getting less grumpy with co-workers because there is more breathing room.* One counselor summed it up nicely by writing,

While the current closed office environment does have its challenges, the benefits still outweigh those challenges and I'm happy to be working in the current environment. I have found the current closed environment one in which it is much easier to focus on your work. The phone calls are easier to take, the emails are easier to keep up on, and the application review moves much more smoothly. This is all due to the fact that interruptions and distractions come much less given the current environment. Privacy has been improved and frankly so has the sense of value as an employee. When I first got an individual office, I was surprised how much of a difference it made in my own sense of importance in the office. Now that all the counselors have their own individual office space, hopefully others can experience that feeling as well.

Just like in the January questionnaire, the respondents were asked to describe the drawbacks of the closed office environment. There were comments such as; *I am not able to witness my coworkers while they work. It was an incredible learning experience to be able to watch/listen to other counselors [in Behmler Hall] because I was always picking up new phrasings or ways to better do my job, and information does not seem to travel as quickly through the staff. In the old environment if one counselor knew it was as good as telling everyone but now it has to make its way through each counselor individually.* Other counselors commented on the feeling of isolation or lack of social interaction in the closed office setting ... *it is a little lonely from time to time. I don't think that we are as close a group as we were in the old environment ... the office is more cliquy then before. I'm less likely to talk to some counselors then I was in the past, and informal information exchange can occur has be greatly reduced, to me... this is the most significant drawback of the closed office environment.*

Journal and Observations

The researcher chose to record observations and reflections in the form of a journal. The complete record of journal observations may be found in Appendix H. This practice was invaluable as it allowed time for reflection and sense-making on the part of the researcher and it also provided another source of evidence for the case study.

In total, there were fourteen journal entries recorded by the researcher over the sixteen weeks of the study. The entries during the open environment and transition period were, relatively, more substantial than those recorded during in closed office setting. The open office environment was such that admissions counselors partake in innumerable interactions and communications with each other throughout the day, where

in the closed office environment, the admissions counselors (including the researcher) are in a private office where it was much more difficult to observe communications and interactions. It was almost immediately apparent to the researcher that observations would be much more difficult in the closed office environment and modifications were made so that observations would be more accessible. For instance, during the transition period, the researcher made it a point to leave her office every two hours just to see where the admissions counselors were, who was where, what they were talking about, etc. In the admissions counseling profession it is nearly impossible to stay in one's office for more than an hour at a time anyway, so the researcher took these opportunities to observe the happenings of the office. In the March 30 entry the researcher observed,

My office is not totally soundproof-I have the door open all the time, in fact we all do, and I can hear quite a bit of the happenings outside of my office. I can hear foot traffic in the hall, I can hear if my co-worker next to me is on the phone, I can hear when visitors walk in the door -I can even hear the receptionist's phone ring out in the lobby. Truth be told, since all of us counselors are hearing a lot of these things - it keeps us connected. If I am expecting a visitor any moment and I hear the door open and close, I just walk out into the lobby to see if it's my visitor. When it is, I am already out there so no one has to be called, interrupted, etc - it keeps everyone really on task. Having our own offices certainly gives an illusion of privacy but it's not like we 're working in a silo -I can definitely sense much more of what's going on around me than what I can see. It's a practically perfect balance between staying in the loop just enough to

be really efficient, but staying out of everyone's business enough to focus and get a lot of work done.

A typical journal entry for the time spent in the open office environment included a number of anecdotes and observations having to do with interruptions or specific incidents where the open office environment was helpful or a hindrance to day to day activities. Specific examples of journal entries that highlighted the benefits of the open office included, times when the Director popped in, got everyone's attention and made important announcements which allowed for a short, impromptu discussion about the announcement (see January 25 entry); instances where colleagues needed immediate feedback; occasions where someone needed to quickly survey admissions counselors' feelings on a particular issue/trend/idea.

These types of frequent, but short, interactions in the open office environment were beneficial to the day-to-day activities of the office. Though it was nice to have opportunities for immediate communication, much frustration with this environment was also observed, as evidenced by the January 19th entry where the researcher took to tallying every interruption throughout the day and nearly abandoned the mission mid-way through because it was almost too difficult to count how many times she was interrupted throughout the day. Another frustration was mentioned in the January 22nd entry where admissions counselors had to leave their workspace and walk out into the hall or into the Director's office if they needed to make a personal or a private phone call. It was also apparent that sometimes some people were busier than others which created friction when socializing among some would negatively affect others. In general, the socializations that occurred were only a few minutes in length but longer conversations between a couple

people could also be very distracting. There was one counselor in particular who preferred to email just one or two people to ask a question rather than open it up to the entire office. Instant feedback is usually a good thing but too much feedback may be confusing or overbearing for someone who is just starting out in the profession.

The observations from journal entries in the closed office environment were more abundant. During the first week after the move the researcher made it a point to walk out of her office every couple of hours just to get an idea of where people were physically located from time to time. For the most part, at any given time, one or more counselors would be out of their office, speaking with another counselor somewhere else in the building. During this period of transition, there was the feeling of novelty and excitement but one could also sense that the admissions counselors were working much more independently. Though, during any given period of time, it appeared that at least one admissions counselor was away from their office and in the office of another counselor.

The journal method of recording observations and notes afforded the researcher time for reflection throughout the time of the study which provided additional evidence and insight into the ways that communications differed between the open and closed office environments.

CHAPTER FIVE

Discussion and Conclusions

Discussion of Research Findings

This benefits and drawbacks section of the questionnaire was very interesting and corroborated much of what Becker and Sims (2001) found in their research that open office environments were more conducive to ad hoc interaction and communication which led to faster feedback, more opportunities to ask and answer questions, more tacit learning/sharing, and stronger social bonds between workers. This study's findings showed that drawbacks of the open office are their lack of privacy, distractions, and noise. Roelofsen (2008) noted something similar in that "speech (incidental/and or formal meeting discussions, telephone conversations, etc.) form the most disturbing source of noise in an open office accommodation" (p. 204). From this research, it was clear that the lack of privacy in the open office was a big drawback. Research from Nathan and Doyle (2002) also found this to be the case, "Open-plan and shared offices have most complaints about lack of privacy - people have difficulty concentrating, dealing with personal matters and colleagues' annoying habits" (Nathan and Doyle, 2002, p. 26). (in Haynes, 2008, p. 196).

It was striking to see the similarities between this study and the research done by Becker and Sims (2001), Roelofsen (2008) and others who have conducted research in this field. Many of the benefits and drawbacks listed in the literature were also brought to light in this study. As predicted, the research showed that in an open office environment, informal face to face conversations were much more frequent but shorter than those in the closed setting. This was important because Haldin-Herrgard (2000)

found that, "the most common way of sharing tacit knowledge takes place in face to face interaction" (p. 363). This begged the question of how tacit knowledge is shared among admissions counselors in the closed office environment. As mentioned before, the admissions profession is not one in which a counselor is able to sit at their desk for hours at a time. On a typical day, the admissions counselor will be out of their office (in a meeting, chatting with a colleague, getting something off of the printer, etc.) frequently throughout the day. This was observed and recorded in the journal entries for this study. Therefore, in the closed setting, it seemed that the majority of the tacit knowledge is shared while admissions counselors are out of their offices.

In the research of Becker and Sims (2001) email and phone communications tended to be more frequent and longer than those in the open office environment and this, at least in part, was corroborated by the March questionnaire results. Respondents indicated that they had more phone communications with each other and their phone conversations were also substantially longer in the closed setting than in the open environment - phone conversations in January were two minutes or fewer (or not applicable) for all respondents where in March, five out of the six responded that their conversations were 3-5 minutes or 5 minutes or longer. One of this study's findings that differed from the Becker and Sims research was that the admissions counselors reported the same frequency of email communications regardless of the office environment.

A common theme throughout the responses pointed toward a lack of opportunity to socialize, connect, and have informal conversations with each other in the closed office environment. One keen respondent noted, *my informal conversations take place in one office or another, meaning at least one of us (usually both) have to stop working*

completely. Whereas in the open office environment these informal conversations were often had while everyone kept on working - this ability to multi-task, in this sense, is lost in the closed office setting. It was apparent that the counselors appreciated their own space, privacy, peace and quiet but that maybe they also missed the social aspects of the open office environment.

Another small, but interesting, aspect of this study was the potential of an instant messaging tool to be used to recreate an environment for ad hoc, impromptu communications that was achieved with the open office environment. From the questionnaire responses it was evident that an instant messaging tool was used more frequently in the closed office environment, but its effectiveness is not apparent. The researcher's journal also made quite a few mentions of the incorporation of such technology but it was not the main focus of this study and, as mentioned in the next section, the topic might warrant another research study altogether. It is worth noting though, that this research found increased use of instant messaging as a tool for communication in the closed office environment.

One thing has remained unclear, whether or not, by conducting this study, the topic of communication habits and interactions among admissions counselors altered the admissions counselors' behavior or conscientiousness of this topic during the transition. After all, the January questionnaire asked them to predict how communications among the admissions counselors would change when they moved into the Welcome Center. This could have created an expectation of the situation that allowed people to think about the transition in a new light and could have possibly influenced the transition itself. If there were such awareness, it seems that it may have only positively influenced the

transition by setting the stage for counselors to consider how an office location change might alter the ways in which they communicate with each other. Also, if some counselors were nervous about the transition and the way it would affect the office dynamic, it may have put them at ease to know that this very topic was being studied during the transition. Regardless, it seems a smooth transition was made and the research shows that admissions counselors are satisfied with their new offices.

All of the respondents predicted that the ways in which they communicated with each other would change when they moved into the Welcome Center. Indeed, when asked the same question after the move, they all agreed that their communication habits have changed. In effect, the hypothesis of this case study was confirmed. The admissions counselors had a pretty realistic view of the ways in which their communications and interactions would be affected by the office transition.

Multiple strategies of validity were employed "to create reader confidence in the accuracy of the findings" (Creswell, 2009, p. 177). One strategy used was the solicitation of feedback on initial summaries by taking information back to participants as suggested by Creswell (1998) and Yin (2003). The feedback from the participants provided valuable information, insights and suggestions and contributed to the construct validity of the case study itself. The use of multiple sources of evidence; two questionnaires, journal notes and direct observation and the use of theory during the research design process also increased the validity of this study.

Educational Implications

At first glance, it might be difficult to tell how this study might make a difference in the field of education. After all, it was conducted at an educational institution but has more implications for the communication, management and design fields than it may for any others. At least for higher education, there are a couple of interesting implications.

Although considerable research has been conducted of different offices in open and closed environments, this study was unique in that it was a case study of the same office, the exact same group of people, in two different office environments.

Opportunities to conduct a study of this nature come along only as often as complete offices physically relocate into very different work spaces - not too often, one would suspect.

Most every college or university has an admissions office that employs admissions counselors. The physical space designs must vary greatly from one institution to the other. This research showed that although the open office environment has many positive aspects, the closed office setting was more conducive for the practice of admissions counseling. These findings may seem trivial or unimportant; after all, how much could a physical office environment really matter? It seems to matter, at least to this group of admissions counselors, quite a lot. Without generalizing too much, but given the findings of this research, it seems to follow that an assessment of the physical environment in relation to the job duties and functions of the individuals working in that space might yield informative results for offices in a wide variety of fields. It seems that it is important for every office to make sure that they understand their physical space

needs and how their present location/arrangement may be affecting the communications, interactions and learning that needs to take place there.

If a balance between the open versus closed office environment is not struck, it could influence an admissions counselor's proficiency and effectiveness in their job. The potential for diminished productivity could negatively affect student enrollment resulting in concerns for tuition revenues and ultimately, institutional budget challenges. At very small institutions, the direct tie between the bottom line and the effectiveness of the admissions staff is lost on almost no one. Of course there are a whole host of factors in the admissions profession that could affect the bottom line and given this research it is feasible that the open versus closed office discussion is one of them.

Cohen et al (2007) stated that "case studies are a 'step to action' ... begin in a world of action and contribute to it. Their insights may be directly interpreted and put to use." (p. 256). Though the generalizability of the research is minimal, the implications for this specific office situation could be immense. With a better understanding of how this office location change has affected the communication habits of the admissions counselors, the office management will be more equipped to make decisions and strategies in line with their sentiments and observations. By making such informed decisions, the office will have a greater potential to function more efficiently and possibly with greater productivity.

Recommendations for Future Research

It would be interesting to conduct this study from the perspective of admissions counselors who are brand new to the profession. How do they learn/work/operate from the closed office setting? Should modifications be made for new counselors in order to

increase the frequent/short communications that were so valuable in the open office environment? Would this result in a shorter learning curve? Is the learning curve for new counselors longer in the closed office space? How much does the office (physical design) affect a new admissions counselor's ability to learn the job?

Another research opportunity would be how to find ways to take the benefits of both environments and modify communication strategies in order to incorporate the benefits of the open office into the closed environment. Further research could focus on the implementation and study of some strategies or ways to make the closed office setting more conducive to informal communication, community building, observation of peers, information flow and accuracy. One way to do this might be to explore the extent to which technology, specifically an instant messaging tool, could create the environment for ad hoc, impromptu communications that was achieved with the open office environment. Technology such as this could possibly take what is beneficial about the open office environment and make it available to people in the closed office setting. Of course, there are limitations to this idea but it would be worth looking into. This was also suggested by Marshak (2004).

Finally, further research could include a replication of this study in a similar environment (where an office is moving from an open to a closed, or vice versa, setting). Further research such as this would allow for a comment on the reliability of this study given that Yin (2003) reports the reliability of a case study is determined by whether "the operations of the study... can be repeated, with the same results" (p. 34).

Summary

Many small institutions depend heavily on the tuition revenue of each student that is enrolled. The admissions offices in these institutions are often directly associated with this revenue in terms of the number of students that they are able to recruit and enroll. Many small institutions take a very personal approach to recruiting; campus visits are often individualized, complete with a personal meeting with an admissions counselor. It may be this aspect alone that warrants the closed/private office environment for admissions counselors.

Becker and Sims (2001) wrote that a balance (between open and closed environments) must be struck - and it all depends on the needs of the profession. Given the findings of this study, it seems, at least for this institution, there is much potential to strike this balance. The benefits of the closed office environment seem to outweigh the benefits of the open setting. The drawbacks of the open office; distractions, interruptions, lack of privacy, minimal meeting space for visitors, seem to outweigh the benefits of instant communication and feedback, learning from colleagues and impromptu socializing. The drawbacks of the closed office environment; lack of opportunities for observation of colleagues and informal information exchange, information flow, loneliness and fewer socializing opportunities seem to be outweighed by the benefits of having a place to meet with visitors, more privacy, more focus and fewer distractions.

In light of this information, further steps may be taken in order to blend the best of both settings which will allow for deliberate communication and an even better working environment for the admissions counselors at this institution.

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Appendix A

Gatekeeper Permission Consent Email

Original Message

Subject:Re: Permission for Research Study
Date: Sat, 19 Dec 2009 16:17:54 -0600
From:Bryan Herrmann <herrmanb@morris.umn.edu>
To:Tara Winchester <taraw@morris.umn.edu>
References:<4B2D2198.3090607@morris.umn.edu>

Tara,

Thanks for the opportunity to review your proposal. I agree to allowing you to conduct this study in the Admissions office at the University of Minnesota, Morris. I am very interested in your findings.

Sincerely,

Bryan Herrmann
Director of Admissions

Tara Winchester wrote:

> Hi Bryan,
>
> It's best if I have written permission from you for my study. I have
> attached the IRB application materials and it would be great if you
> could email me back with your approval. If you have any questions or
> concerns please let me know as I am not planning on sending this to
> IRB until I have your full permission. To recap: I would like to
study
> the transition from the open office environment of our current office
> situation to the closed office environment (private offices) of the
> space we are moving into. Specifically, I want to study the affect
(if
> any) the different environments has on the ways in which admissions
> counselors communicate with each other. Admissions counselor
> participation in the study is entirely voluntary. I will communicate
> the details of the study to each counselor (via email) and will gain
> their consent in accordance with the procedures of the Institutional
> Review Board of the University of Minnesota. The general approach for
> the activities of the study will consist of administering two
> qualitative, web-based questionnaires to each participant (one before
> the move and one approximately 2 months after). These are the only
> activities of the study that require the admissions counselors to
> specifically do something. I would certainly appreciate your feedback
> on these questionnaires.
>
> The remaining activities will be observation, (and note-taking), and
> journaling of day to day office activities during the remaining time

> in our current location and up until the administration of the second
> survey to the admissions counselors. I do not anticipate this study
> to
> disrupt the typical work day at any point. The results will be
> reported in my final project paper. I will not report any names or
> identifying information of people, places or activities in the final
> project. I anticipate that you will gain valuable insight regarding
> the communication habits of the admissions counselors from this
> report's findings.
>
> I plan on sending this off to the IRB soon after I have your written
> permission.
> Thanks, Bryan!
> Tara

Appendix B

IRB Approval Email

TO : kriordan@umn.edu, taraw@umn.edu,

The IRB: Human Subjects Committee determined that the referenced study is exempt from review under federal guidelines 45 CFR Part 46.101(b) category #2 SURVEYS/INTERVIEWS; STANDARDIZED EDUCATIONAL TESTS; OBSERVATION OF PUBLIC BEHAVIOR.

Study Number: 0912E75554

Principal Investigator: Tara Winchester

Title(s):

Transitioning from an open to a closed office environment: Case study of a university admissions office

This e-mail confirmation is your official University of Minnesota RSPB notification of exemption from full committee review. You will not receive a hard copy or letter. This secure electronic notification between password protected authentications has been deemed by the University of Minnesota to constitute a legal signature.

The study number above is assigned to your research. That number and the title of your study must be used in all communication with the IRB office.

Research that involves observation can be approved under this category without obtaining consent.

SURVEY OR INTERVIEW RESEARCH APPROVED AS EXEMPT UNDER THIS CATEGORY IS LIMITED TO ADULT SUBJECTS.

This exemption is valid for five years from the date of this correspondence and will be filed inactive at that time. You will receive a notification prior to inactivation. If this research will extend beyond five years, you must submit a new application to the IRB before the study's expiration date.

Upon receipt of this email, you may begin your research. If you have questions, please call the IRB office at (612) 626-5654.

You may go to the View Completed section of eResearch Central at <http://eresearch.umn.edu/> to view further details on your study.

The IRB wishes you success with this research.

We have created a short survey that will only take a couple of minutes to complete. The questions are basic, but will give us guidance on what areas are showing improvement and what areas we need to focus on:

<https://umsurvey.umn.edu/index.php?sid=36122&lang=um>

Appendix C

Invitation to Participate Email

Original Message

Subject:invitation to participate

Date:Mon, 18 Jan 2010 17:55:33 -0600

From:Tara Winchester <taraw@morris.umn.edu>

To:

CC:Bryan Herrmann <herrmanb@morris.umn.edu>

Hello Admissions Counselors,

For my master's level thesis I am conducting a research study. I am studying the affect that our office moving to the Welcome Center will have on communication habits and interactions among admissions counselors. Specifically, I would like to look at the affects of an open

versus closed office environment. You are a potential participant because you are an admissions counselor in this office. As a participant

you will be asked to complete two questionnaires, one before we move to the new building (in the coming week) and one a few months after. I anticipate that it will take you approximately 30 minutes to complete each questionnaire. In addition to administering the questionnaires, I will be observing and taking notes on admissions counselors' communication habits during our transition to the Welcome Center until sometime in March 2010. I will be observing in public spaces only. To be

very clear, participation in this study is completely voluntary. If you decide to participate, the information you provide will be entirely confidential, private and will remain anonymous in any report or findings that I publish.

A consent form (for your records) is attached to this email. You do not need to sign or return this form but a quick email back to me stating your consent to participate in this study is appreciated.

Finally, this research is in full compliance with regulations of the Institutional Review Board of the University of Minnesota and has the approval of Bryan Herrmann, Director of Admissions at UMM. If you have any questions about participating please contact me via email, phone or in-person. You may also contact Kim Riordan, UMD College of Education and Human Service Professions, 218-726-7251, kriordan@d.umn.edu

Thanks!

Tara

Appendix D

January 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

1. Default Section

This questionnaire should take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your answers will inform current research on open office environments,

"Open" office environments are those in which co-workers are able to see and/or hear each other throughout their day to day activities. The current working environment of the UMM Admissions office is considered, for the purposes of this study, an open office environment.

This questionnaire is only concerned with work-related interactions/communications that you have with fellow admissions counselors.

Many questions are structured to allow you to freely respond. Please describe your answers in detail.

2.

*** 1. How long have you worked in the admissions profession?**

More than 18 months

Fewer than 18 months

No answer

3.

*** 1. How frequently (per day) do you use the following methods of communication with your fellow admissions counselors when you are in the office (not traveling)?**

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never/MA
Informal face to face conversations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Formal (meeting type) face to face conversations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Phone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instant message /online chat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*** 2. Are there other methods of communication that you use with admissions counselors that are not listed in the chart above? Please explain.**

4.

*** 1. How long (in minutes) is a typical informal face to face conversation with a fellow admissions counselor? Indicate your best estimate.**

2 minutes or fewer

3-5 minutes

More than 5 minutes

Not applicable

No Answer

*** 2. How long is a typical phone conversation with a fellow admissions counselor? (While you are both in the office - neither of you is traveling.)**

2 minutes or fewer

3-5 minutes

More than 5 minutes

Not applicable

No answer

5.

*** 1.**

Please indicate the extent to which you agree with the following statement:

The open office environment provides me the opportunity to frequently learn from my fellow admissions counselors by observing (watching/hearing) their behavior.

Agree

Somewhat agree

Somewhat disagree

Disagree

Don't know

No Answer

*** 2. Please describe the extent to which you agree with the statement in the question above.**

6.

*** 1. When we move to the Welcome Center, do you believe the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors will change?**

Yes

No

Unsure

No answer

7.

1. Please explain how the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors will change, when we move to the Welcome Center.

8.

*** 1. Please explain how the ways in which you communicate with fellow admissions counselors will not change when we move to the Welcome Center.**

9.

*** 1. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the benefits of the current open office environment. Please describe what you see as the benefits of working in the current open office environment.**

*** 2. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the drawbacks of the current open office environment. Please describe what you see as the drawbacks of working in the current open office environment.**

10.

Thank you for completing the January 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire, I very much appreciate your feedback. If you have any questions or would like to speak with someone about this questionnaire please contact either Tara Winchester (taraw@morris.umn.edu 320-293-4417) or Kim Riordan (218-726-7251 kriordan@d.umn.edu)

Appendix E

Results from January Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

1. How long have you worked in the admissions profession? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Response Percent	Response Count
More than 18 months	50.0%	3
Fewer than 18 months	50.0%	3
No answer	0.0%	0
<i>answered question</i>		6
<i>skipped question</i>		0



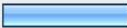
1. How frequently (per day) do you use the following methods of communication with your fellow admissions counselors when you are in the office (not traveling)? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

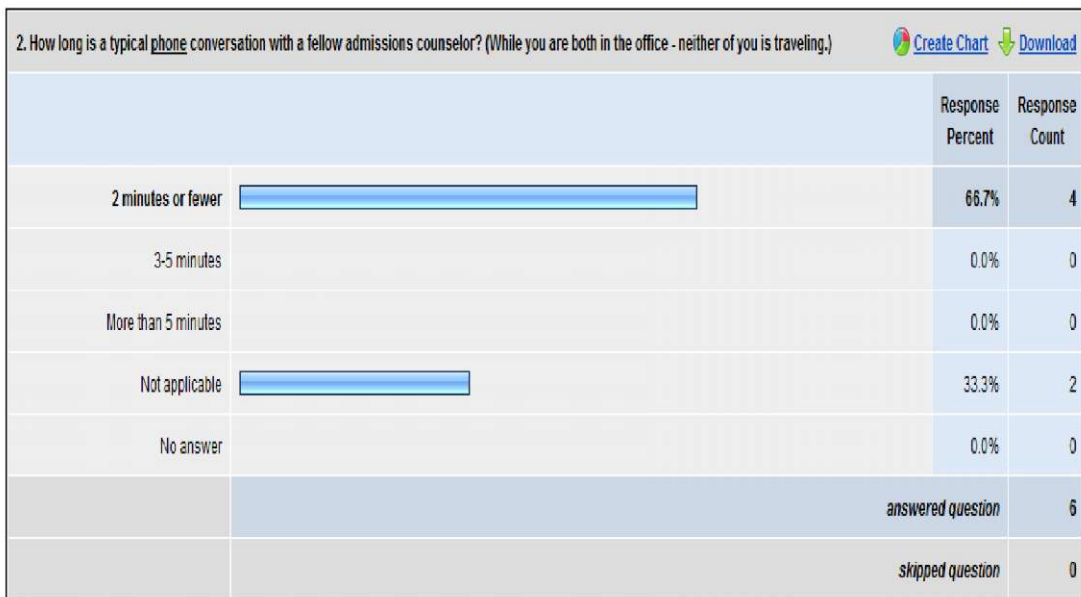
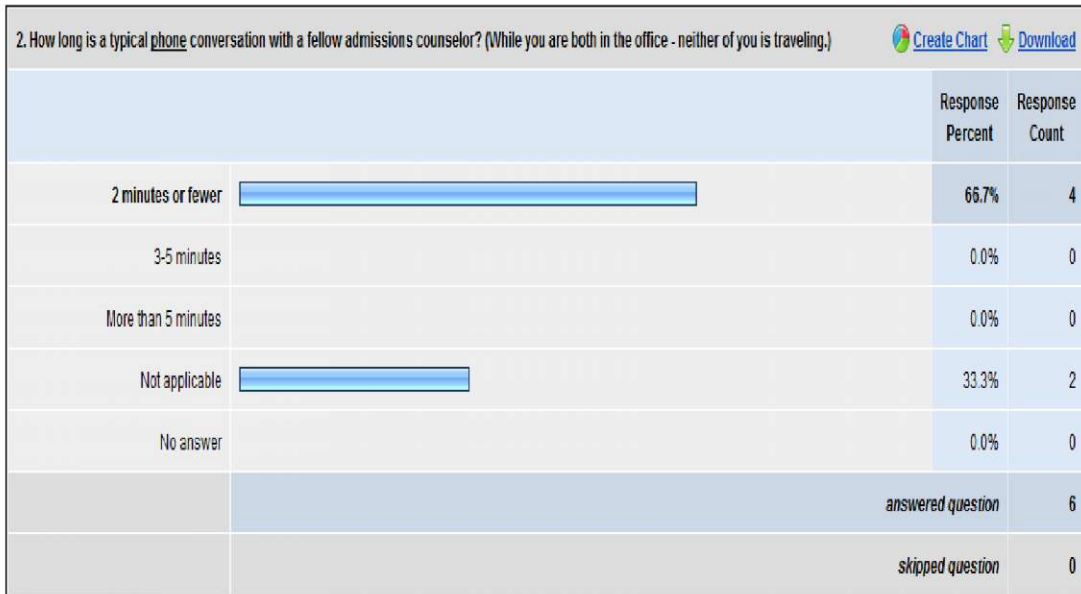
	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never/NA	Response Count
Informal face to face conversations	83.3% (5)	0.0% (0)	16.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	6
Email	33.3% (2)	50.0% (3)	16.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	6
Formal (meeting type) face to face conversations	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (6)	0.0% (0)	6
Phone	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (3)	50.0% (3)	6
Instant message /online chat	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	100.0% (6)	6
<i>answered question</i>					6
<i>skipped question</i>					0

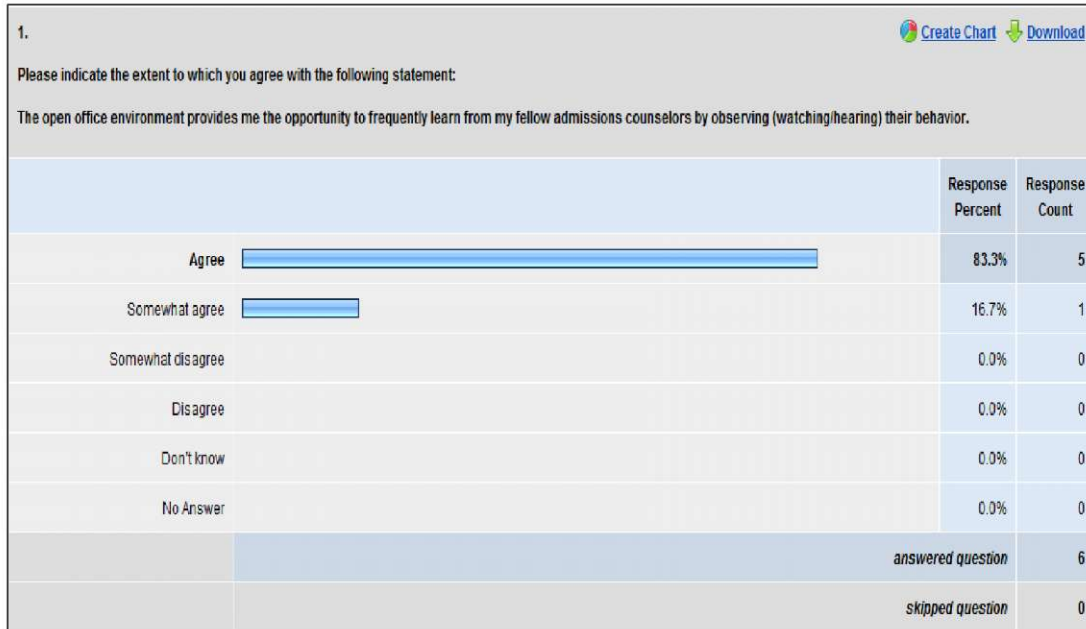
2. Are there other methods of communication that you use with admissions counselors that are not listed in the chart above? Please explain. [Download](#)

	Response Count
	6
Hide replies	
1. no	Tue, Jan 26, 2010 4:01 PM Find...
2. No.	Tue, Jan 26, 2010 9:53 AM Find...
3. texting	Mon, Jan 25, 2010 8:43 AM Find...
4. No	Sun, Jan 24, 2010 7:44 PM Find...
5. None that I can think of at this point.	Fri, Jan 22, 2010 2:51 PM Find...
6. None that I can think of.	Thu, Jan 21, 2010 7:21 PM Find...
	<i>answered question</i> 6
	<i>skipped question</i> 0

1. How long (in minutes) is a typical informal face to face conversation with a fellow admissions counselor? Indicate your best estimate. [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Response Percent	Response Count
2 minutes or fewer 	50.0%	3
3-5 minutes 	33.3%	2
More than 5 minutes 	16.7%	1
Not applicable	0.0%	0
No Answer	0.0%	0
	<i>answered question</i>	6
	<i>skipped question</i>	0



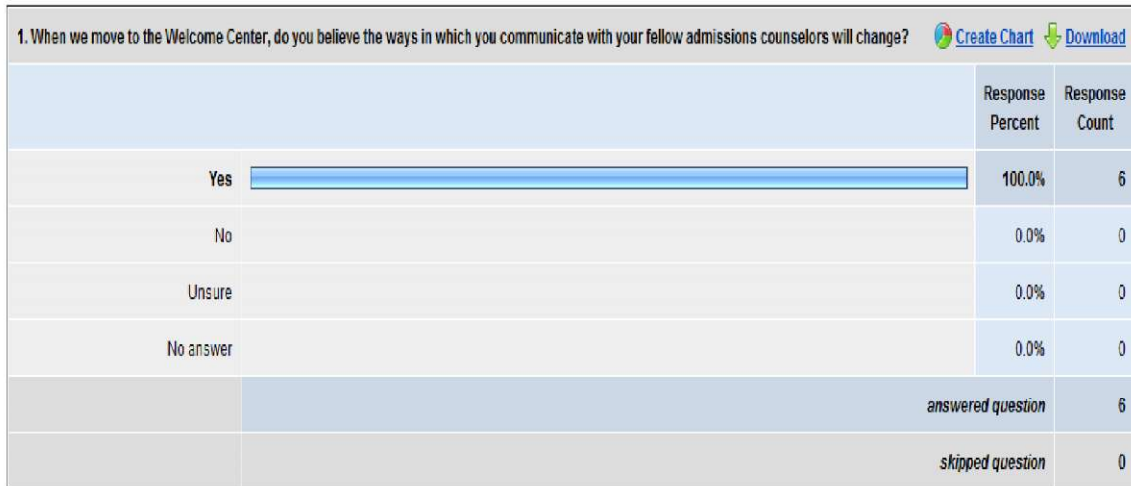


2. Please describe the extent to which you agree with the statement in the question above. [Download](#)

	Response Count
	6

[Hide replies](#)

1. I strongly agree. I often listen to other counselor's phone calls to students regarding scholarship information, HSV, and admission status question to learn how to better phrase my calls. I find listening to other counselors discussing touch admission cases helps me to understand my own cases better. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 4:03 PM [Find...](#)
2. STRONGLY agree. One of the most valuable training tools for me was listening in on phone conversations admissions counselors with parents, students, guidance counselors, etc. I continue to use this tool. I was also able to observe the ease in which experienced counselors communicated with each other, asked each other questions, etc, which really made it comfortable for me to do the same. I have been able to continue my training (even though I'm now an experienced counselor) with ease through the same processes. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 9:57 AM [Find...](#)
3. sometimes you are on the phone and don't want others to listen in on Mon, Jan 25, 2010 8:44 AM [Find...](#)
4. In this setting I am able to observe what types of conversations are had and not had, the type of information shared and how it is shared with prospective students, families and other staff members over the phone and in person in the office. I would say that all of these experience were VITAL in my ability to do my job as well as I do today. I was able to ask questions about things I overheard and model some of my professional behavior/ interactions after more experienced counselors. It was also an opportunity for other counselors to hear my conversations/ interactions and make suggestions or corrections. Sun, Jan 24, 2010 7:50 PM [Find...](#)
5. I definitely believe that I've learned the most from hearing/seeing the communication mechanisms my fellow admissions counselor's utilize. I'm able to listen to how they approach different topics over the phone and see their interactions with the co-workers who share the office. I'm also able to frequently ask them questions and receive their immediate feedback because we're in the same space. Fri, Jan 22, 2010 2:53 PM [Find...](#)
6. Contrary to closed office environments, the openness of the admissions office greatly assisted in my speedy training when I started in admissions at Morris. This job is one where learning from the actions of more experiences and seasoned counselors helps one become better at his/her own job much faster than formal sit down training sessions. It is also the case that said seasoned counselors learn from new counselors in this setting, especially involving new ideas or approaches in working with students that he/she might not have thought of or considered. Thu, Jan 21, 2010 7:23 PM [Find...](#)



1. Please explain how the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors will change, when we move to the Welcome Center. [Download](#)

[Hide replies](#) 6

1. I strongly believe there will be less face to face communication with other counselors and more e-mail interaction. I'm much less likely to ask some of the counselors questions if I have to walk down to their offices. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 4:05 PM [Find...](#)
2. I'm going to have to make more of a conscious effort to seek out my peers and ask questions, give feedback, etc. One of the benefits of the open office is that you can ask a question to an entire group of people and get different perspectives immediately. I can see me only asking one person, maybe two, when I have a general question, and miss out on other perspectives just for the sake of time. I will communicate by phone and email more and may use an instant messenger of some sort. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 10:00 AM [Find...](#)
3. not as much informal conversation Mon, Jan 25, 2010 8:45 AM [Find...](#)
4. We will no longer be able to simply speak to the entire office at any given time in a face to face manner. I think that there will be more phone calling between counselors and as well as an increase in email communication. Sun, Jan 24, 2010 7:52 PM [Find...](#)
5. I think we may rely more so on online communication rather than direct, face to face communication. It would be rather time consuming to get up and go to someone's office everytime one has a question. Our communications amongst each other may become less personable. Fri, Jan 22, 2010 2:54 PM [Find...](#)
6. Being that we will all have our own individual offices, the ability to casually ask questions with other counselors will be greatly limited. In addition, the learning curve for new counselors will be extended due to the fact that it will be much more difficult to pick up on the actions of experienced staff due to the limits of the walls between each other. Another aspect of the office communication that will change is the informal conversations we each have as colleagues. Even though these conversations may not always pertain to work, they do help maintain a stronger office environment when it comes to work as it helps new staff learn where other staff members fall in terms of issues involving work and admissions practice. Thu, Jan 21, 2010 7:27 PM [Find...](#)

1. Please explain how the ways in which you communicate with fellow admissions counselors will not change when we move to the Welcome Center.

	Response Count
	0
<i>answered question</i>	0
<i>skipped question</i>	6

1. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the benefits of the current open office environment. Please describe what you see as the benefits of working in the current open office environment. [Download](#)

	Response Count
Hide replies	6

1. I think it's helpful when discussing common issues that we all face as counselors. For example low English sub scores, an emerging trend among our applicants. I think it's also helpful with keeping track of what other counselors are up to. For example, with new counselors, making sure they're giving accurate information in their telephone calls. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 4:09 PM [Find...](#)
2. The ability and opportunity to ask questions immediately. Observing peers, both experienced and new to the position. Unprompted feedback from peers (they hear you say something in a conversation and can add, correct, etc) Questions are put forth to a group of people instead of just an individual. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 10:06 AM [Find...](#)
3. being able to ask questions to anyone willing to answer Mon, Jan 25, 2010 8:45 AM [Find...](#)
4. I think that advantages are that we are able to learn from each other so easily. Listening to veteran counselors interact with families, students and staff provides a model for newer counselors to learn from. It also allows for counselors to bounce ideas and thoughts off all the counselors in the office at one time rather than just one counselor at a time and I believe that can lead to fruitful conversations and some great ideas. Sun, Jan 24, 2010 7:57 PM [Find...](#)
5. I believe the biggest benefit is the immediate access to someone who may be able to assist me with a question or give me their advice on a situation. In addition, I believe having an open office makes my job a bit more enjoyable because it allows us to take mini-breaks and catch up with one another. I feel we do a good job of balancing work vs. being social and it ultimately boosts our productivity. Fri, Jan 22, 2010 3:01 PM [Find...](#)
6. There are many benefits to the open office environment. By far the most important is one that I think has been raised in previous questions. The ability for new staff to quickly learn all the ins and outs of a job such as an admissions counselor is greatly expedited in an open office environment. So much of this job is learned by watching and listening to those that have done this before. If new staff are able to freely listen to phone conversations and how other seasoned staff talk to students in general, these new staff members are able to cut the time they need to learn the ropes of the job much shorter. Thu, Jan 21, 2010 7:34 PM [Find...](#)

2. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the drawbacks of the current open office environment. Please describe what you see as the drawbacks of working in the current open office environment. [Download](#)

	Response Count
Hide replies	6

1. I think it makes the work space very informal. As a result it's easier to take interactions in a personal manner that they may not be intended. I think it can be a distraction, when trying to focus. It also is harder to make sensitive phone calls, when you know others are listening/ there are other things going on in the work space. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 4:09 PM [Find...](#)
2. It can be really hard to focus on a difficult task with background noise. It's difficult to hear people talking on the phone when office mates are talking in the back ground. It's impossible to easily have a private conversation with someone, whether a co-worker, applicant, etc. Tue, Jan 26, 2010 10:06 AM [Find...](#)
3. privacy with students sometimes Mon, Jan 25, 2010 8:45 AM [Find...](#)
4. I would say that the biggest drawback is the amount of interruptions through out the day. I think that with so many counselors in such a tight environment it is easy to get off topic and distracted from the work you need to be doing. Sun, Jan 24, 2010 7:57 PM [Find...](#)
5. I believe that one drawback is the inability to receive feedback from solely one person when seeking out advice. In an open office environment, every person in that space is able to listen to the question at hand and in turn, offer their response. At the same time, it's difficult to ask someone to step out of the shared office space in order to ask him or her a question because once again, every other person in that space can see that interaction. In summary, one drawback of the open office space is a lack of privacy. Fri, Jan 22, 2010 3:01 PM [Find...](#)
6. While the benefits are many and very significant, the drawbacks of an open office environment do pose some significant risk. These same open lines of communication that help the learning curve can also make a new counselor very apprehensive or nervous about demonstrating what he/she has learned around others. Talking with students as a new counselor is already a very nerve racking experience and having other, more experienced, counselors always being able to hear what you are saying makes for a very confrontational environment on occasion. This open environment can also make it very difficult for counselors to individually focus on difficult projects that require a lot of focus and attention. This has been especially evident to me as I've made the move from an open environment to the more closed environment I am in today. Thu, Jan 21, 2010 7:34 PM [Find...](#)

Appendix F
 March Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

March 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

1. Default Section

This questionnaire should take you approximately 30 minutes to complete. Your answers will inform current research on closed office environments.

"Closed" office environments are those in which co-workers are not able to see and/or hear each other while at their workspace conducting day to day activities. The current working environment of the UMM Admissions office is considered a closed office environment. Please expand your responses to any length necessary.

The questions on this questionnaire are only concerned with work-related interactions/communications that you have with fellow admissions counselors.

Many questions are structured to allow you to freely respond. Please describe your answers in detail.

2.

*** 1. How frequently (per day) do you use the following methods of communication with your fellow admissions counselors when you are in the office (not traveling)?**

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never/NA
Informal face to face conversations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Email	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Formal (meeting type) face to face conversations	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Phone	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Instant message /online chat	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>
Texting	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>	<input type="radio"/>

*** 2. Are there other methods of communication that you use with admissions counselors that are not listed in the chart above? Please explain.**

3.

March 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

*** 1. How long (in minutes) is a typical informal face to face conversation with a fellow admissions counselor? Indicate your best estimate.**

- 2 minutes or fewer
- 3-5 minutes
- More than 5 minutes
- Not applicable
- No Answer

*** 2. How long is a typical phone conversation with a fellow admissions counselor? (While you are both in the office - neither of you is traveling.)**

- 2 minutes or fewer
- 3-5 minutes
- More than 5 minutes
- Not applicable
- No answer

4.

*** 1. Please indicate the extent to which you agree/disagree with the following statement:**

The closed office environment provides me the opportunity to frequently learn from my fellow admissions counselors by observing (watching/hearing) their behavior.

- Agree
- Somewhat agree
- Somewhat disagree
- Disagree
- Don't know
- No Answer

March 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

*** 2. Please describe the extent to which you agree/disagree with the statement in the question above.**

5.

*** 1. Since moving into the Welcome Center, do you believe the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors has changed?**

- Yes
 No
 Unsure
 No answer

6.

*** 1. How have the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors changed, since moving into the Welcome Center?**

7.

*** 1. How have the ways in which you communicate with fellow admissions counselors not changed since moving into the Welcome Center?**

8.

March 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

- * 1. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the benefits of the current closed office environment. Please describe what you see as the benefits of working in the current closed office environment.**

- * 2. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the drawbacks of the current closed office environment. Please describe what you see as the drawbacks of working in the current closed office environment.**

9.

Thank you for completing the March 2010 Admissions Counselor Questionnaire, I very much appreciate your feedback. If you have any questions or would like to speak with someone about this questionnaire please contact either Tara Winchester (taraw@morris.umn.edu 320-293-4417) or Kim Riordan (218-726-7251 kriordan@d.umn.edu)

Appendix G

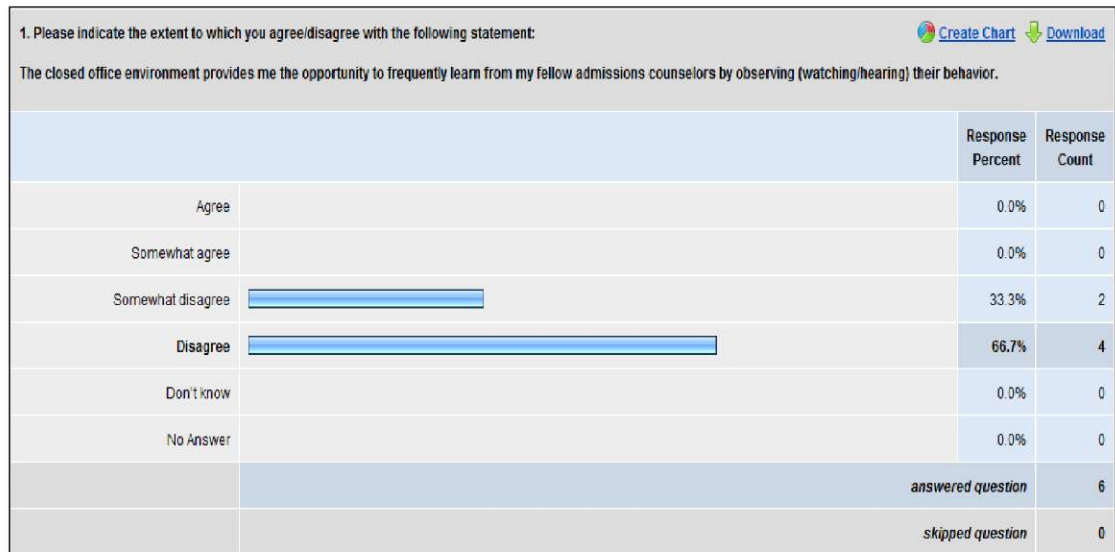
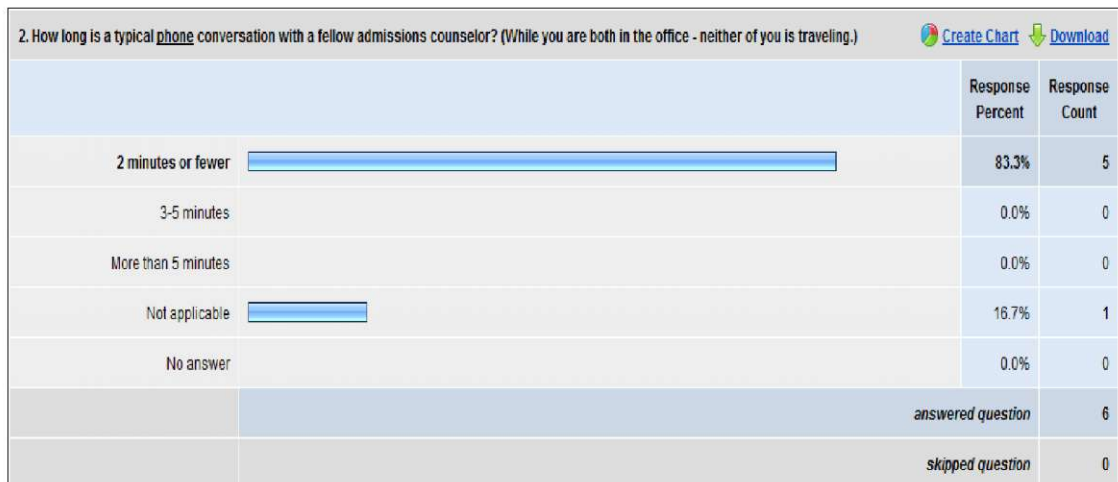
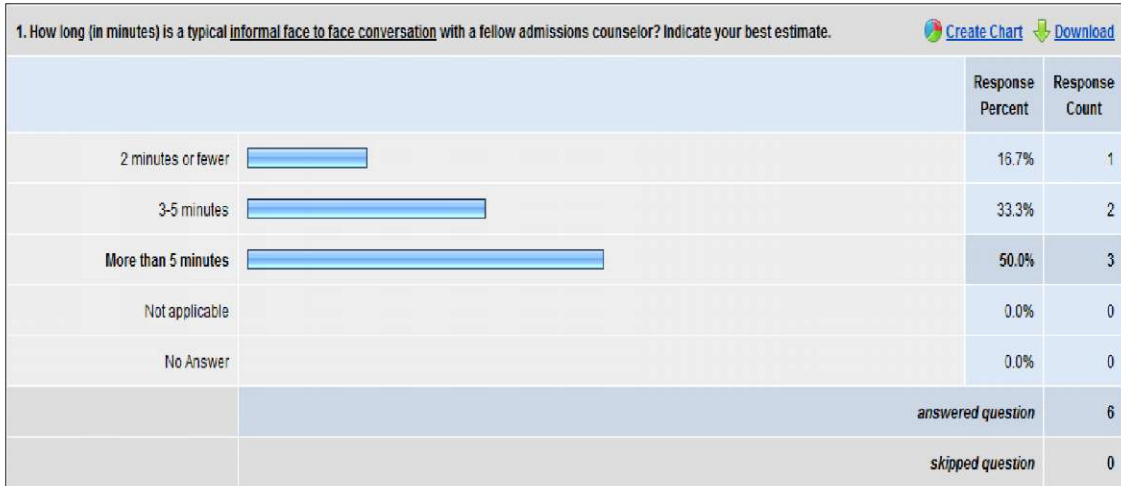
Results from March Admissions Counselor Questionnaire

1. How frequently (per day) do you use the following methods of communication with your fellow admissions counselors when you are in the office (not traveling)? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Very Often	Often	Sometimes	Never/NA	Response Count
Informal face to face conversations	16.7% (1)	66.7% (4)	16.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	6
Email	33.3% (2)	50.0% (3)	16.7% (1)	0.0% (0)	6
Formal (meeting type) face to face conversations	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	66.7% (4)	33.3% (2)	6
Phone	0.0% (0)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (2)	33.3% (2)	6
Instant message /online chat	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	33.3% (2)	66.7% (4)	6
Texting	0.0% (0)	0.0% (0)	50.0% (3)	50.0% (3)	6
<i>answered question</i>					6
<i>skipped question</i>					0

2. Are there other methods of communication that you use with admissions counselors that are not listed in the chart above? Please explain. [Download](#)


	Response Count
<div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>1. No. Tue, Apr 13, 2010 12:38 PM Find...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>2. no Fri, Apr 9, 2010 8:29 AM Find...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>3. Not that I can think of at this moment. A lot of 'dropping in' to offices, chatting from the doorway, or talking in open area by the mailboxes/printer. Mon, Apr 5, 2010 2:07 PM Find...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>4. No other forms of communication used in the office Tue, Mar 30, 2010 5:14 PM Find...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>5. I will direct page counselors to get their attention. Tue, Mar 30, 2010 12:40 PM Find...</p> </div> <div style="border: 1px solid #ccc; padding: 5px; margin-bottom: 5px;"> <p>6. While reviewing applications for admission, our office uses notes that others can read to express our thoughts about a specific application. While this might be a stretch as a type of office communication, it does help keep us in tune with other admissions counselors views on office issues, namely who should/should not be admitted. Mon, Mar 22, 2010 12:57 PM Find...</p> </div>	6
<i>answered question</i>	
<i>skipped question</i>	



2. Please describe the extent to which you agree/disagree with the statement in the question above. [Download](#)

	Response Count
	6
Hide replies	
1. While I do get to observe my co-workers from time to time, I have to actively seek out the opportunity. Previously, I could listen to impromptu conversations over the phone or even hear immediate feedback about a recent email or student visit.	Tue, Apr 13, 2010 12:42 PM Find...
2. I think you learn much more if you have someone there all the time to be able to answer some of your questions.	Fri, Apr 9, 2010 8:31 AM Find...
3. The only time I can 'learn' from my co-workers is when I actively seek them out to ask them a question or if I somewhat overhear a visitor meeting in the office next to mine. It doesn't work so well.	Mon, Apr 5, 2010 2:08 PM Find...
4. With the new closed office setting I almost never get to see or hear the counselors while they are working. In the new space we close our office doors while meeting with families and make our phone calls in the privacy of our offices.	Tue, Mar 30, 2010 5:17 PM Find...
5. It's very hard to keep track of what others are doing/saying in the individual offices.	Tue, Mar 30, 2010 12:41 PM Find...
6. Given the nature of the new closed office environment, I have noticed a significant change in the ways that I am able to learn from my colleagues. It much more difficult to hear other speak with students and families on the phone, but more importantly, the informal learning opportunities have been significantly reduced. While I have worked in admissions for some time, I still look for opportunities to learn from others. This becomes more of an issue for new counselors as so much of what we learn that helps us do our jobs better comes from observing those that have learned the ropes before you. This closed environment significantly reduces the opportunities that new counselors have for such observation.	Mon, Mar 22, 2010 1:02 PM Find...
	answered question 6
	skipped question 0

1. Since moving into the Welcome Center, do you believe the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors has changed? [Create Chart](#) [Download](#)

	Response Percent	Response Count
Yes 	100.0%	6
No	0.0%	0
Unsure	0.0%	0
No answer	0.0%	0
	answered question	6
	skipped question	0

1. How have the ways in which you communicate with your fellow admissions counselors <u>changed</u> , since moving into the Welcome Center?		Download
		Response Count
Hide replies		6
1. I have to make more of an effort, which I'm ok with, but it seems to take a lot more time. I also use the phone a lot more, and my informal conversations take place in one office or another, meaning at least one of us (usually both) have to stop working completely.	Tue, Apr 13, 2010 12:43 PM	Find...
2. less communications	Fri, Apr 9, 2010 8:31 AM	Find...
3. I think there's much more "informal" talk that isn't necessarily work related. Many of our conversations will begin with work-related subjects but then trail off onto something different because there's significant separation between us now. I am also more hesitant to ask questions when I have to go find someone who might have my answer rather than before when I could just turn around and ask. I do like the ability to have more one-one-one conversations though so I don't have to be bombarded with several opinions.	Mon, Apr 5, 2010 2:10 PM	Find...
4. I would say that I communicate less with the other admissions counselors now and when I do it has a tendency to be quick interactions in person or through email. I discuss applications or problems that I encounter throughout the day less because other counselors are not as easily accessible. In order to have face to face interactions I have to actually seek out a counselor rather than be able to just ask questions to the group as a whole from my work area. Communication in the closed office setting is definitely a more deliberate act. I have to choose to communicate with a specific counselor and what exactly it is I want to communicate as opposed to the constant communication with all the counselors in the old environment.	Tue, Mar 30, 2010 5:25 PM	Find...
5. I have less contact with them face to face. I'm less likely to ask opinions or for help.	Tue, Mar 30, 2010 12:41 PM	Find...
6. I have to set aside time to purposefully seek out colleagues with the goal of simply just talking. This poses a challenge as it's hard to know when people are in the middle of something or if it's a good time to chat. The old environment, while quite challenging for many reasons, did provide an environment in which it was easier to communicate with other counselors. Another area regarding changed communications, one that worries me, is that the ease in which counselors only speak with close friends/people they agree with has significantly increased. The danger is that small groups of counselors align with certain views/opinions that are different than other staff members. While this is probably inevitable in any work environment, the level that this self segregation can reach is greater than that in our previous open environment.	Mon, Mar 22, 2010 1:09 PM	Find...

1. How have the ways in which you communicate with fellow admissions counselors <u>not changed</u> since moving into the Welcome Center?		Response Count
		0
<i>answered question</i>		0
<i>skipped question</i>		6

1. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the benefits of the current closed office environment. Please describe what you see as the benefits of working in the current closed office environment. [Download](#)

	Response Count
Hide replies	6

- I am not as easily distracted and can focus on tasks without trying to zone out a lot of background noise. I also enjoy having extra space on my desk, and just more space for storage and for meeting with families. Tue, Apr 13, 2010 1:16 PM [Find...](#)
- You don't have to worry about others listening in on your phone conversations with students. Fri, Apr 9, 2010 8:32 AM [Find...](#)
- Again, I like that I have more opportunities to get one-on-one advice rather than with the group setting where multiple people would offer their opinion. I also think the private space is beneficial when it comes to making phone calls. Before, I would become self-conscious because I felt that others were listening and/or judging me but now I'm alone in the room when I call which makes me more comfortable. Mon, Apr 5, 2010 2:14 PM [Find...](#)
- I would say the biggest benefit to the closed office environment is that I am more productive in a work day because I am able to sit in a quiet space and work (almost) uninterrupted. Tue, Mar 30, 2010 5:35 PM [Find...](#)
- It does make me more productive in my work day. I also find myself getting less grumpy with co-workers because there is more breathing room. Tue, Mar 30, 2010 12:43 PM [Find...](#)
- While the current closed office environment does have its challenges, the benefits still outweigh those challenges and I'm happy to be working in the current environment. I have found the current closed environment one in which it is much easier to focus on your work. The phone calls are easier to take, the emails are easier to keep up on, and the application review moves much more smoothly. This is all due to the fact that interruptions and distractions come much less given the current environment. Privacy has been improved and frankly so has the sense of value as an employee. When I first got an individual office, I was surprised how much of a difference it made in my own sense of importance in the office. Now that all the counselors have their own individual office space, hopefully others can experience that feeling as well. Mon, Mar 22, 2010 1:24 PM [Find...](#)

2. I would like to better understand your perspectives on the drawbacks of the current closed office environment. Please describe what you see as the drawbacks of working in the current closed office environment. [Download](#)

	Response Count
Hide replies	6

- I don't feel that I know my co-workers as well as before (or what's going on in their lives). It's difficult to keep track of who is in office vs who is traveling without going to each individual office now that we're in travel season, and it takes longer to figure out who's doing what (meeting with visitors, covering telecounseling, etc). Tue, Apr 13, 2010 1:16 PM [Find...](#)
- You don't have the luxury of asking a quick question if you need help. Fri, Apr 9, 2010 8:32 AM [Find...](#)
- At times I feel 'cut-off' from everyone, especially when we're in a line of work where people are already gone a lot due to travel. At times, I do feel less motivated because I enjoyed working in the presence of my co-workers before and it gets lonely in a single office! It becomes difficult at times to approach people because I don't want to feel like I'm interrupting them, if they're on the phone, etc. Mon, Apr 5, 2010 2:14 PM [Find...](#)
- The biggest draw back is that I am not able to witness my coworkers while they work. It was an incredible learning experience to be able to watch/listen to other counselors because I was always picking up new phrases or ways to better do my job. Tue, Mar 30, 2010 5:35 PM [Find...](#)

Another draw back is that information does not seem to travel as quickly through the staff. In the old environment if one counselor knew it was as good as telling everyone but now it has to make its way through each counselor individually.

The final draw back is that it is a little lonely from time to time. I don't think that we are as close a group as we were in the old environment.
- I think the office is more cliquy then before. I'm less likely to talk to some counselors then I was in the past. Tue, Mar 30, 2010 12:43 PM [Find...](#)
- Yes, there are some significant drawbacks to the current closed office environment. Even though some are significant, they still do not outweigh the benefits of this environment. The ability in which informal information exchange can occur has been greatly reduced, to me... this is the most significant drawback of the closed office environment. The issue of self segregation that I raised in an earlier response is another drawback of the closed environment. Much of this is still very new for us given the recent move. With that said, that makes it all the more important for our office to identify issues early and work to come up with solutions before communication problems that stem from this closed environment become too significant. Mon, Mar 22, 2010 1:24 PM [Find...](#)

Appendix H

Journal Entries and Observations taken by Tara Winchester

Tuesday, January 19, 2010

*Today I decided to keep a casual tally of verbal interruptions and distractions throughout my regular work day in the open office environment. I would make a tally if the interruption caused me to lose focus on my task at hand. I began this project at 9:00 a.m. and stopped counting around 3:00 p.m. This project was much more labor intensive than I anticipated. To remember to make a tally every time I was interrupted was, it seemed, nearly impossible. Numerically, I made 42 marks. Therefore, on average, I was interrupted 7 times per hour or once every 8.5 minutes. Interestingly, I just read an article in *The Atlantic* that the average office worker works 11 minutes without interruption and it takes about 25 minutes to "resume an interrupted project" (Brown, 2010, p. 57). In actuality, I was not interrupted every 8.5 minutes, there were a few 20 minute spans of uninterrupted work time but there were also times with frequent interruptions where it seemed that I would just get back to the task at hand and then be interrupted again.*

As I was paying attention to making these tallies it occurred to me that I must explain that these interruptions, although at times superfluous, were more times than not, useful for at least one of the people involved in the conversation. It should be clear that interruptions are certainly not always negative nor are they extremely bothersome, but they do take my mind off of what I am working on at the time. On days like today, I found it difficult to get back into the groove of things - it was hard to concentrate. I've noticed, after having worked in this environment for almost 5 years that some days are better than others in terms of getting back to my work after asking/answering questions. I am sure the simple act of making a tally for every interruption also broke my concentration. I was certainly less productive on the whole because I was counting the interruptions.

I'd like to note that I also interrupt. For today, I only counted the number of times I was interrupted but I also do my fair share of interrupting. I was acutely aware of the times in which I broke the silence - though it seemed that we all had our fair share of questions, depending on the day, some of us interrupt each other more than others.

Brown, R. (2010, January/February). The state of the union is ... *The Atlantic*, 305, 56-57.

Friday, January 22, 2010

Today was one of those days where I had great intentions of completing a whole bunch of tasks, yet, by 5:00pm it seemed I had yet to cross one thing off of my to-do list. With phone calls, urgent emails, staff meetings, a visit from a co-worker and her newborn baby, and preparations for the big move to the new building I was certainly distracted.

Though I did notice today one thing of note - any time that I or one of my co-workers has a private phone call or something personal that they need to take care of they always have to go into the hall or leave in order to take care of this business. I guess this is one of the drawbacks of us all being in very close quarters ... no privacy, whatsoever.

Monday, January 25, 2010

I drove into work today weathering a nasty blizzard to get to the office and pack up all of my things. I couldn't miss this day! There was a giddy, Christmas morning-like excitement and anticipation in the air. It seemed like everyone was excited to move into the new building. We spent much of the day packing but I only worked half of the day because the weather service declared a blizzard and no travel advisory in our county. One thing that I noticed this morning was that our Director had popped in and out of the office a few times, to make an announcement and have quick discussions with all of us counselors. I suppose there will be much less opportunity for these impromptu "get everyone on the same page" mini-meetings when we are in the new building. I wonder how much of an affect that will have? Maybe it will mean more emails - but it's kind of nice when everyone can comment and talk about it all at the same time.

Tuesday, January 26, 2010

Woke up to a beautiful winter morning. This is it - it's moving day. Our phones were slated to make the transition about 10:30 am and, by that time, most all of the admissions counselors had wandered over to the new building to begin unpacking and settling into their private offices. That first afternoon was really weird. I had the feeling that I was the only person in the whole building - so I'd peek outside my door and I'd see another admissions counselor walking in the hall and I'd be reassured that the rest of my colleagues were actually still there. I kept getting halfway out of my chair to go ask a colleague a question and then thinking to myself "I can't always run over to their office and ask my question - I'll spend the whole day walking around." But sometimes I couldn't resist the urge and instead of emailing or picking up the phone, I got up and went to their office. I noticed that the hallways were busy with counselors doing much of the same thing that I just described. Maybe because we had been used to asking questions in person - we felt that that was the only way to find out an answer. I suspect that this inclination will fade after a while though. There's also the novelty of the new space and seeing how everybody was coming with unpacking, etc.

Wednesday, January 27, 2010

Today was our first full day in the new building. We all arrived and began work - as usual except no one asked me how my night was or what I had for dinner. There was no small talk about the morning's headlines or inside jokes about messy desks. There was no laughter or emotion of any kind - just me, working quietly in my own office - just as I had always dreamed. I noticed that the interactions were missing - but I can't say that I missed them. We'll see if I feel the same way in a week - but I am liking having my own office. I have ditched my headphones for speakers and I honestly felt very productive after today. So productive that I took a lunch hour! Today I tried to get up out of my chair every couple of hours or so just to take a quick scan of the working area. Every time that I got up - at least one of the admissions counselors was out of their office either working in another office or with another staff member in a public space. My Director came into my office to offer this same observation. He noticed that admissions counselors seemed to be out of their offices - out and about - frequently. Whether or not

this is simply a function of the job, or a comment on getting used to the new working environment, I guess time will tell.

Thursday, January 28, 2010

We had our first staff meeting (in the new building) this morning. There were no communication related issues presented at the meeting. I think that the admissions counselors are still settling in and we haven't really gotten down to the nitty gritty of how we're going to keep each other informed. It seemed like people were adjusting nicely to their own offices. I'll have to say, it is weird to go for hours on end without seeing some of my colleagues. We were all squished into a teeny workspace before and we had that visual bond where even if we didn't speak, we saw each other, and knew one another were at their desks. It's different now - my colleagues could be off campus and I wouldn't know. Where before, usually I saw people come and go - we kept much closer tabs on each other. I am not sure that this is going to affect the way that we communicate but it is something that I've observed.

February 2, 2010

Me and a couple of my co-workers have been testing a new chat/instant messenger option through Google called Wave and we think it will work well to sort of keep each other in the loop about everyday office occurrences. It won't replace the open office environment - but it sort of does the same thing by allowing people to ask questions asynchronously and then having people answer them when they are able. It is good because the person with the question doesn't have to wait to ask it (i.e. forget to ask it) and the rest of the admissions counselors can answer when they are able. I sent a quick email out to the other admissions counselors who haven't been testing it and I already received one reply. The thing about Wave is that it is not yet open to the public, people have to be invited and they have to have a Gmail account so it's a little less widely known than other chats through MSN, etc. But I like Wave because it has many features that these other services do not. For instance, in Wave we can have one wave with all of the admissions counselors so everyone can see what everyone else is typing and talking about. I think this really could replicate some of the benefits of the open office environment.

In terms of other observations, it's hard for me to tell. It is incredibly busy these days and it just seems like everyone is working very hard all of the time.

February 9, 2010

Well so far 5 of the 7 admissions counselors have signed on to Google Wave. The number of communications and comments is pretty good so far. There's a lot of making lunch plans and notifying the group that we'll be out of the office for whatever determined period of time for whatever reason but I think this is important info to share too (even if it is not related to the practice of admissions counseling). Most of the communication happens between 3 of the 5 admissions counselors. The tough thing about Wave is that we have to remember to sign into it everyday. If you're not signed in, then you can't see what you're missing and you can't tell if someone is "waving" to you. Sometimes the day just starts off so quickly that I forget to sign in until noon - it really is

not effective if we're not all signed in. Maybe I can think of a good way to sign in every morning - just get into the habit of it, I guess.

February 16, 2010

I met with my first student in my office last Friday! That was exciting. It was such a relief to know that I didn't have to find a place to meet -- I could use my own space with relative privacy and not have to run around campus looking for an open room. Also, it saved time and was much more efficient. Not to mention the building looks so nice - it's just a much more pleasant experience for everyone!

February 23, 2010

I am really noticing the benefits of having my own office. I can have phone conversations in private, discuss sensitive issues with students without worrying about confidentiality, I am so much more focused and have sustained periods of time to work. I feel like I accomplish much more every day and overall, am more efficient, if not more productive too. So much of my day is about building relationships - with students, parents, guidance counselors, teachers, etc... it is much easier to do this when I am not being interrupted every few minutes. I have time to THINK about my job and reflect on situations and strategies. What a relief!

March 1, 2010

Today I noticed some of the negative aspects of having my own office. I was trying to print out a mail merge of letters and certificates and people kept printing on my paper -- I couldn't just yell out "hey, I'm using the printer - no one print!" which is what I used to do. Instead, I found myself running to the printer, putting paper in, running back to my desk, pressing print, all the while crossing my fingers that no one hit print before I did. Yikes - this was a little stressful. Of course, I could have sent out an email that said I was using the printer but people aren't always on email so that wouldn't have solved the problem totally - and going around to everyone's office to tell them individually would have taken way too much time. This was one project that took more time because of the closed office environment than would have in the open office setting.

March 19, 2010

Another busy week in admissions! Now is the time where admissions counselors are out of the office for spring travel. We are visiting high schools around the state and region in order to meet students who are interested in Morris. This makes it particularly difficult to comment on admissions counselor communications since, on any given week, 4-5 of us are out of the office. Needless to say, it has been a pretty quiet couple of weeks in terms of interactions with admissions counselors. We have had a staff meeting where most of us were able to attend, but other than that, I haven't seen a whole lot of very many people. A general observation is that things are going well. I haven't witnessed any communication snafus recently - at least nothing that could potentially be attributed to us having our own offices.

March 22, 2010

Today I was thinking about how new counselors (new hires) will adapt in the closed office environment. I think it will take longer for them to learn the ropes than it did for the new counselors in the open office. This would be a whole other case study but when we have new counselors we should really take this seriously. There has to be a way of merging the benefits of the open office while minimizing the drawbacks of the closed office setting. The key would be to find ways to implement the sharing of tacit knowledge in the closed office space. Maybe this is through a tool like Wave or certain hours or parts of the day where the new counselors sit in the same office as a more experienced counselor - just to overhear, learn, observe, etc...

March 30, 2010

A final update on Wave - its use has really tapered off and I'm not sure what to think about it. I really think it's good to have (and use!) but it seems like we're either too busy to sign in, forget to sign in or it's not actually as useful as I want to believe it is -- or maybe, we're not as disconnected as I originally thought we would be. Now that we're all settled in I have a couple observations. My office is not totally sound proof -- I have the door open all the time, in fact we all do, and I can hear quite a bit of the happenings outside of my office. I can hear foot traffic in the hall, I can hear if my co-worker next to me is on the phone, I can hear when visitors walk in the door -- I can even hear the receptionist's phone ring out in the lobby. Truth be told, since all of us counselors are hearing a lot of these things - it keeps us connected. If I am expecting a visitor any moment and I hear the door open and close, I just walk out into the lobby to see if it's my visitor. When it is, I am already out there so no one has to be called, interrupted, etc -- it keeps everyone really on task. Having our own offices certainly gives an illusion of privacy but it's not like we're working in a silo -- I can definitely sense much more of what's going on around me than what I can see. It's a practically perfect balance between staying in the loop just enough to be really efficient, but staying out of everyone's business enough to focus and get a lot of work done.