

## Welcome Aboard: A Program for Improving the New Hire Experience for Academic Libraries

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### Abstract

New hire orientation often consists of a checklist of tasks but does little to integrate a new employee to the organization. Previous research indicates that organizational socialization is key to successful onboarding, but few models exist for libraries to support this aspect of a new hire's experience. This article shares an onboarding program adopted by one academic library and discusses the results of an assessment of the new program for newly hired librarians. Findings indicate that a structured onboarding program can improve organizational socialization during a librarian's first months on the job.

### Introduction

Many aspects of the hiring process require detailed attention. After a candidate begins work at an organization, the task of getting acclimated to their new role and contributing productively to the organization begins. Organizational entry is a crucial step in any new employee experience for both the employee and the organization. It is important to provide more than just an orientation to facilities and job tasks, but also to make the newly hired employee feel welcome and to begin to nurture their professional development. The first months of an employee's tenure present a good opportunity to build loyalty and instill a sense of organizational culture. A thoughtful organizational entry process can accelerate the rate at which a new hire feels comfortable in their new role, becomes familiar with their work environment, and gains an understanding of the inner workings of the organization.<sup>1</sup> More comprehensive than a simple orientation, an onboarding program can be crucial to helping a new employee quickly become productive within their role while also making them feel like a welcome member of a team.

As with other organizations, libraries can benefit from a thoughtful onboarding program.<sup>2</sup> Onboarding is "the process of integrating and acculturating new employees into the organization and providing them with the tools, resources and knowledge to become successful and productive."<sup>3</sup> Libraries are complex organizations and library employees must be able to navigate information systems and organizational structures efficiently if they are to serve their patrons effectively. It behooves libraries to take care with the onboarding of new employees and ensure that their organizational entry experience is robust. This article shares an onboarding program adopted by one academic library and discusses the results of an assessment of the new program.

### Literature Review

While many organizations view orientations as a human resources task including such activities as payroll and benefits enrollment, office and work space preparation, and taking an official employee photograph,<sup>4</sup> onboarding focuses on providing the new employee with the resources needed for success in their new role. Among other things, onboarding should include activities related to organizational socialization as well as job preparation. Van Maanen defined organizational socialization as "the manner in which the experiences of people learning the ropes of a new organizational position, status, or role are structured for them by others within the organization."<sup>5</sup> Introductions and meetings with colleagues both inside and outside the

department develop the employee's network while in-depth trainings on procedures, software, and facilities prepare the employee to meet the demands of the job. It is these types of tasks that ensure a newly hired individual will become a productive, competent employee with a strong sense of loyalty and engagement within the organization.<sup>6</sup>

Several studies from the human resources literature have investigated the role of socialization in a new hire's successful transition to an organization.<sup>7, 8, 9, 10</sup> Van Maanen drew attention to the processes of socialization on a continuum of institutional to individual processes and encouraged organizations to be strategic about the implementation of these processes.<sup>11</sup> Testing Van Maanen's strategies, Ashforth and Saks found that a structured, institutionalized approach to new-hire socialization was associated with higher job satisfaction and greater organizational commitment as well as lower negative outcomes such as stress, conflict, and ambiguity.<sup>12</sup> They also noted, however, that highly structured socialization correlated with lower employee innovation and self-appraisal. While these studies focused on the organizational perspective, Louis outlined a framework for understanding new hires' experiences of organizational entry and socialization, concluding that organizational insiders can play a pivotal role in helping new hires make sense of unfamiliar and surprising situations.<sup>13</sup> Challenging the prevailing framework of organizational socialization, Cable, Gino, & Staats found that organizational and new hire outcomes improved when socialization strategies encouraged new hires' authentic self-expression.<sup>14</sup>

As in the field of human resources, research regarding the onboarding process in the academy has emphasized the role of socialization.<sup>15</sup> The early development of relationships with both senior and peer faculty is important for new academic faculty.<sup>16, 17</sup> In a needs assessment of new faculty, Boman, Yeo, and Matus found that new faculty members placed a high importance on developing collegial relationships, especially across departments.<sup>18</sup> Through interviews with new faculty, Fleming, Goldman, Correll, and Taylor found that faculty in departments that actively encourage the development of relationships through mentoring, meetings with senior faculty, and interdepartmental collaborations experienced the greatest sense of integration.<sup>19</sup> Although not all academic librarians have faculty status, librarians' onboarding experience is often similar to that of their faculty colleagues, with human resources providing a basic institutional orientation while leaving the librarian's home department with the responsibility for organizational socialization.<sup>20, 21</sup>

Research regarding best practices for onboarding in academic libraries also draws attention to the important role of socialization for librarians and discusses measures for enhancing socialization during onboarding.<sup>22, 23</sup> Studies exploring new librarians' experiences also find that interpreting organizational values, negotiating unexpected experiences, and building alliances are essential to becoming a productive member of the library.<sup>24, 25, 26</sup> Advice to library managers and administrators stresses that introducing new employees to the organizational mission and culture is a strategic part of any onboarding process, along with providing an explanation of job roles and responsibilities.<sup>27</sup> Managers can help new librarians become engaged in their new role by balancing structured and unstructured time during the onboarding process.<sup>28</sup>

### **The Onboarding Training Grid**

Originally conceived at Nova Southeastern University (NSU) and later adapted for use at the University of Nevada, Reno (UNR), the Onboarding Training Grid (the Grid) is, on the face, a checklist for new employees (see Appendix A). Rather than list administrative tasks, however, the focus of the Grid is on people first and job- and topic-related tasks second. During new

employee training, each task or topic on the Grid is assigned to a current employee who serves as the point-of-contact for that task. The point-of-contact is responsible for providing the new hire with discussion or training on the appointed topic. It is the point-of-contact's responsibility to determine the nature and direction as well as the level of formality and the length of time for each meeting. New employees are given the Grid on their first day of employment, along with a brief overview of its purpose. They are then expected to complete all of the items on the Grid.

The Grid gives responsibility for initiating contact and setting up meetings to the new hire. This is important for several reasons. First, it establishes a formal workflow and provides each new hire with a structured set of tasks that must be completed. Second, the new hire is introduced to the norms of organizational communication, including the library's directory, email system, and appointment scheduling software. Third, it alleviates the burden of experienced employees to keep track of which new employees have received training and which have not.

By assigning a grid of training tasks and meetings, the goal is to structure a new employee's first weeks and months on the job in a way that maximizes their understanding of their new work environment while integrating them into the organizational community and culture. Therefore, the Grid serves as a means for new employees to learn about things they will need for their job, as well as to meet coworkers, learn where to refer patrons for various inquiries, and build a greater appreciation for each department's duties and roles within the organization. The items on the Grid are color coded to reflect the expected timeframe for the completion of each task. Three colors indicate tasks that should be completed within the new employees' first week, first month, and first three months.

Prior to the adoption of the Onboarding Training Grid by the Research and Instructional Services department at UNR, there was little to no formal new employee-training program. A new faculty orientation packet provided by Human Resources outlined account activations, benefits and payroll enrollment, phone and voicemail set-up, and obtaining a parking permit. Within the department, a checklist existed to guide the orientation process that included essential training, but consisted of many administrative tasks that required completion before the arrival of the new employee. Examples of included tasks were the installation of an office phone and computer, setting up an email account, and making a new office nameplate. The checklist also included a few items for the employee such as receiving an institutional ID and getting headshots for online profile pages. While these tasks are important and must be completed in a timely manner, they did not address organizational learning or meaningful job training. Some experienced staff did reach out to new employees to introduce themselves and to provide orientations to their departments or roles. However, this was not a formal process, was not included in the checklist, and was done on a case-by-case basis.

In the Fall of 2017, a task force was assembled to create an onboarding program that would formalize the training that each new employee received within Research and Instructional Services. The goals of the task force were to create an enhanced training plan that allows new hires to become familiar with every library department, to learn how the library functions, and to meet as many librarians and library staff as possible. The task force consisted of both recently hired librarians who provided insight into their experiences as new hires with no formal onboarding, as well as seasoned employees who provided organizational knowledge about the UNR Libraries. The task force determined that the Onboarding Training Grid used at NSU would serve as an excellent model for what the department wanted to accomplish and the Grid was adapted with permission.

The element of human interaction within the Onboarding Training Grid was critical to the goals of the task force. It was considered just as important—if not more important—for new

hires to understand who makes the libraries run as it is for them to learn how the libraries run. Through interactions with many experienced employees, new hires would gain a greater appreciation for the organizational culture and be introduced to multiple perspectives of the library and the university. Sharing onboarding responsibilities among many points-of-contact would also help to make connections with people in departments and roles that the new hire may seldom interact with otherwise. These interactions could increase the new hire's appreciation for other departments, bring them up to speed about the latest projects and happenings, and quickly humanize all of the new faces of the organization. By meeting with so many people within the library, it was hoped that new hires would form connections and relationships to build a more cohesive, cordial, and fluid work environment. Nevertheless, it was not always realistic to assign a different point-of-contact for every subject on the Grid. Some topics dictate meeting with the individual with the most expertise, thereby making it appropriate for one point-of-contact to cover multiple subjects.

## Considerations

The implementation of the Onboarding Training Grid did not come without challenges. Proposed at a time when the Research and Instructional Services department was set to hire three new subject liaison librarians, as well as one new part-time faculty member, the Grid, it was decided, would need to be slightly customized to enhance the experience of each new hire. While two of the librarian positions were awarded to people completely new to the organization, the third position was earned by a librarian transitioning from a position with a temporary contract at the university to a permanent, tenure-track role. The part-time position was given to an individual who had already been working as an instructor within another university department. Both of the new hires with previous experience at the university were given customized Grids that removed some of the subjects with which they were already familiar. Additionally, considerations for each new hire's Grid were made in regard to their role, the tasks they would be expected to perform, and the subjects and departments with which they liaise.

Before the creation and implementation of the Grid commenced, the task force needed to secure the buy-in of the library's higher level administration. Due to the time the points-of-contact would be diverting from their normal jobs, and the changes this would mean to the library's customary new hire orientation practices, the decision to proceed ultimately had to be made by the library's dean. Owing to the customized nature of the Grid to the Research and Instructional Services Department, approval for the final version of the Grid also needed to be secured from the department's director. Although the task force was motivated to include as many points-of-contact as possible, the director wished to limit the number of meetings to avoid the process becoming overly burdensome to library departments and staff, including the new hires themselves. In the end, a sensible compromise was reached.

## Methods

After implementing the Onboarding Training Grid, the task force began assessing the effectiveness of the new training program. The researchers wanted to answer several basic questions about the Grid:

- What were participants' perceptions of the value of the Grid?
- How effective did participants feel the Grid was in establishing their organizational understanding and connectedness to colleagues?
- How practical was the structure and implementation of the Grid for participants?

- What can be done to improve future iterations of the Onboarding Training Grid?

In order to find the answers to these questions, the researchers created two online surveys, one for new hires and one for points-of-contact, using the Google Forms survey administration application. The Google Forms platform allows a survey to be administered with great flexibility in using various question types, and produces easily accessible results.<sup>29</sup> The use of an E-survey was favored because of the convenience for participants as well as the demonstrated reliability of the method.<sup>30</sup> This assessment was granted an exemption from UNR Institutional Review Board approval because it was deemed to be minimal risk research with no federal funding/support. The survey for new hires consisted of a consent for participation followed by nineteen questions, including five Likert scale questions, eight free response questions, five yes/no questions, and one multiple choice question (see Appendix B). Survey results were collected from all three new hire respondents (n = 3). The fourth new hire did not commence work until after the assessment. The assessment survey for points-of-contact (n = 13) consisted of a consent for participation followed by twenty-two questions, including ten free response questions, eight Likert scale questions, and four multiple-choice questions (see Appendix C). The researchers received thirteen responses from the twenty-seven possible participants. A limitation of the study is that those who had negative feedback may have chosen not to respond.

## Findings

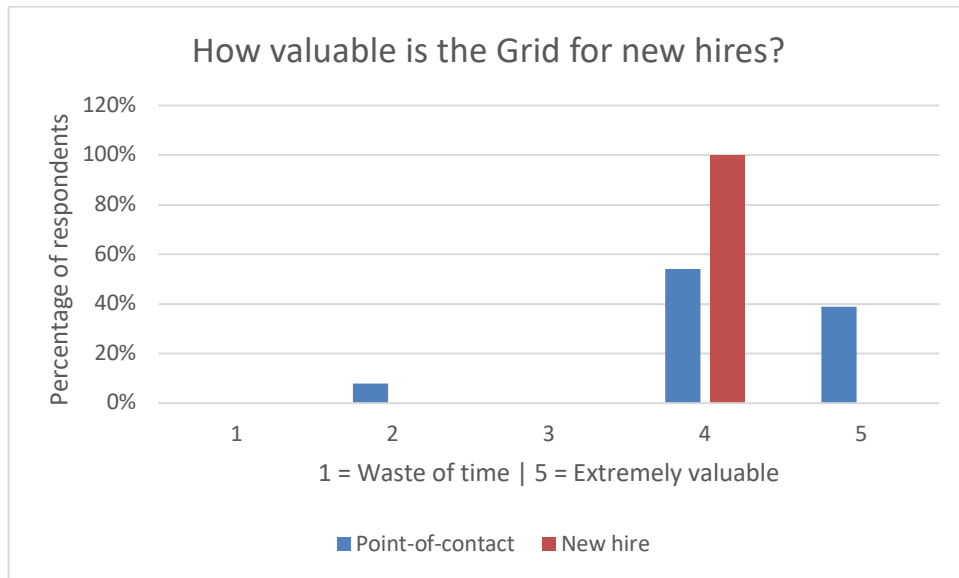
Survey results for the points-of-contact and new hires were used to assess the new Onboarding Training Grid. Of particular interest to the researchers were responses that spoke to the importance of and suggested improvements to onboarding procedures within the organization. These responses demonstrated the impact of the Grid and provided guidance for its future implementation. The overall findings were positive in nature. The findings below represent some of the key takeaways from the surveys.

### *Value of the Onboarding Training Grid*

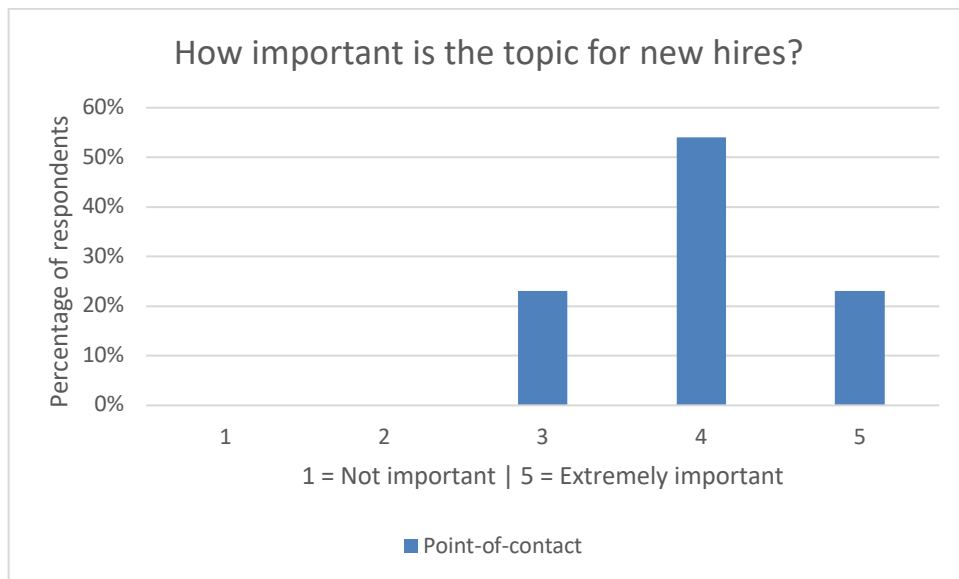
All new hires and 92% of points-of-contact who responded to the survey ranked the value of their Grid experience as a four or five, on a scale of one to five (Figure 1).<sup>\*</sup> Both new hires and points-of-contact agreed that the topics covered on the grid were very important. While all of the new hires thought the topics were important each respondent selected different topics that they believed were the most important. Among points-of-contact, 77% ranked their assigned topic's importance a four or five (Figure 2), and two out of three new hires felt the topics would be helpful in carrying out their future job responsibilities. When asked how likely they would be to sign up for a version of the Grid intended for experienced employees, over 50% of points-of-contact responded with a four or five.

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<sup>\*</sup> All Likert questions were rated on a scale of one to five, where five was the highest possible ranking (e.g., best experience) and one was the lowest possible ranking (e.g., worst experience).



**Figure 1: New Hire vs Point-of-Contact opinion on value**

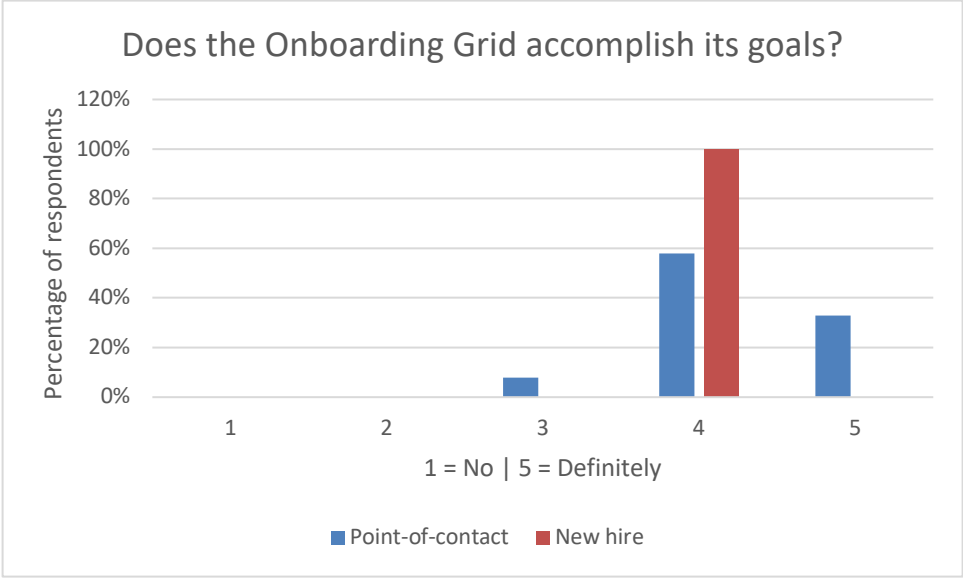


**Figure 2: Point-of-Contact opinion on assigned topic**

### *Achievement of Onboarding Goals*

As part of the assessment, both new hires and points-of-contact were asked to describe the goal(s) of the Onboarding Training Grid. The researchers noted that responses from each group were thematically similar. For instance, one new hire wrote, “To help introduce new librarians to how the library works, who they can go to when they need help in certain areas, and to help introduce them to people.” Meanwhile, a point-of-contact wrote, “A chance for new librarians to learn how the library operates, meet their coworkers, and learn where/who they can

go to for help in specific areas.” Both responses address organizational functionality, procedures for getting assistance, and a chance to engage with new colleagues. All new hires and 92% of points-of-contact agreed that the grid accomplishes the goals they described (Figure 3).



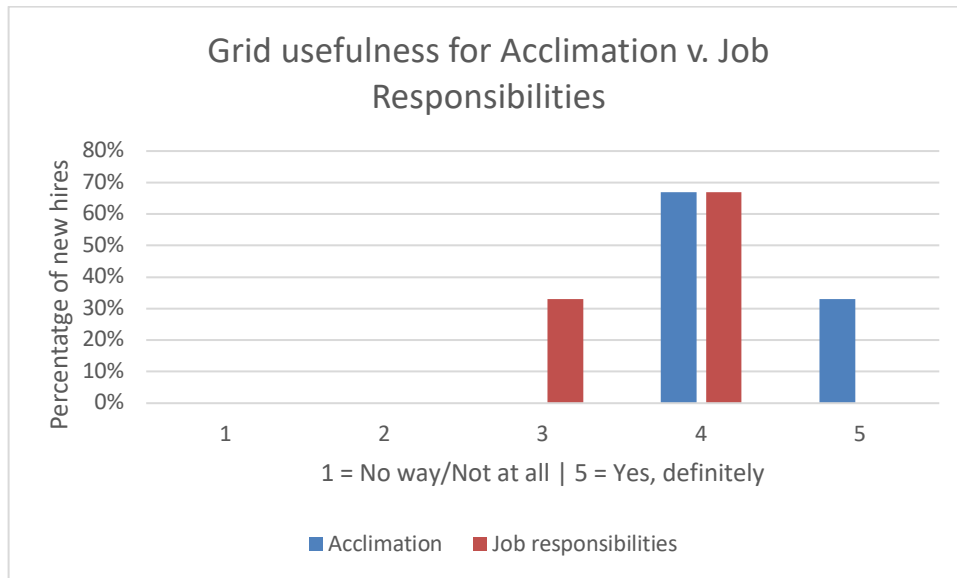
**Figure 3: New Hire (left) and Point of Contact (right) opinion of accomplishing Onboarding goals**

*Comparison to Past Onboarding Experience*

When comparing the Onboarding Training Grid to past onboarding experiences, both the points-of-contact and new hires claimed to have gotten very little onboarding or orientation when starting either a previous job or their current job. Five points-of-contact said they did not have any onboarding experience and were expected to learn on-the-go. When comparing previous onboarding experiences with the Grid, respondents described the Grid as “more comprehensive,” “more organized,” “much better,” “much more informative,” “more coordinated and systematic,” and one said “I wish something like this had been established.”

*Organizational and Social Acclimation*

New hires were asked to rank how helpful the grid was in becoming acclimated to a new work environment, and all selected either four or five. When asked about how useful the Grid would be in helping new hires carry out their job responsibilities two of the three new hires selected four or five. New hires were even more confident that the Grid would help them with organizational acclimation with all three respondents selecting four or five (Figure 4). Two new hire respondents agreed that the Onboarding Grid provided a better understanding of organizational structure as well as organizational culture and two agreed that they were able to make personal connections through use of the Grid.



**Figure 4: New Hire perception of Onboarding Grid for usefulness in environmental acclimation (left) vs job responsibilities (right)**

Over 60% of the points-of-contact felt the Grid provided new hires with a chance to get to know them. All points-of-contact indicated that they got a chance to learn about the new hires during their meetings. Most said they learned details about the new hires’ professional backgrounds and experiences, and some mentioned that they learned personal details about the new hires’ including their personalities, learning styles, and activities they enjoyed in their free time.

### *Critiques of the Onboarding Grid*

While most respondents from both groups agreed that the new onboarding program was successful, they identified areas for improvement. The most common criticism among both new hires and points-of-contact was a need for improved clarity and communication. In particular, the scope of the point-of-contact responsibilities during onboarding needed to be defined more clearly. However, all new hires responded that the Onboarding Grid instructions they received were clear, and that they did not have any difficulty in arranging meetings. Nevertheless, there were mixed feelings among the new hires about the length of meetings. Most meetings were an appropriate amount of time, but, as one respondent put it, “some were too long, while a few were very short and almost useless due to no content being covered.” The inappropriate duration of those sessions was detrimental to meaningful onboarding.

### **Improvements**

In order to address these concerns about the program reported by survey respondents, the Grid and its associated communications were revised. The Onboarding Task Force reworded the initial instructional email to be more clear and concise. Much of the text from the original directions was removed and replaced with simple bullet points, providing more concrete direction about the role of the point-of-contact, including the length and intention of the meeting. This served as a reminder to points-of-contact that these meetings were not equivalent to



training someone to work in their department, and that much of the purpose of the new Onboarding Training Grid included learning about people in addition to learning about job tasks.

Additionally, a column was added to the Onboarding Training Grid to clarify the purpose of each meeting. This column, labeled “purpose,” had three options: general overview, in-depth review, or action. The purpose column informs both the point-of-contact and the new hire about what to expect regarding the nature of the meeting. A general overview serves primarily to introduce the new hire to an important colleague while familiarizing them with a department, service, or function outside their immediate job responsibilities. An in-depth review addresses topics core to the new hire’s job responsibilities and may involve technical training. An action does not require an introduction to any strategic personnel, only a task that needs completion, such as getting a profile photograph and signing up for the university’s web accessibility training class.

Through continual assessment, the Onboarding Training Grid should be updated and improved. It is important that with every new hire the Grid is examined to ensure it is up-to-date, adding and removing tasks as things change within the organization. Including new technologies as they are implemented and eliminating outdated systems and processes ensures that the Grid will remain relevant and useful. Another change to consider is the inclusion of departments or units of the organization outside the library. For instance, academic libraries may want their new librarians to meet with departments such as student services, tutoring and writing centers, diversity and inclusion, and technology offices.

## Discussion & Conclusion

The Onboarding Grid can be an effective tool for providing structured organizational entry and socialization in libraries. New hires surveyed in this assessment reported experiencing increased acclimation to the organization as a result of the Grid. Beyond the job related topics and trainings included in the Grid, which participants felt were relevant, the element of organizational socialization was an important characteristic of new hires’ onboarding experience. Gaining a sense of organizational culture by developing connections and alliances with experienced colleagues is important for successful library onboarding.<sup>31, 32, 33</sup> In addition to feelings of connectedness, participants described the anticipated value of the Grid in introducing them to “who they can go to when they need help.” This finding resonates with Louis’ conclusion of the importance of insiders for newcomers’ sense-making.<sup>34</sup> Respondents also noted a stark contrast between the Grid and previous onboarding experiences, reinforcing the value of moving beyond an orientation checklist to an onboarding program focused on organizational socialization.<sup>35, 36, 37</sup>

Having a structured onboarding system in place can assist new librarians as they begin to use their skills to contribute to their library’s mission. In addition to promoting the learning of job related tasks, the Onboarding Training Grid provides a method for organizational socialization, both in terms of structure and culture. New employees get the opportunity to meet the people they will be working with closely, even daily, as well as those they may work with infrequently, but whose roles and positions are important. Guided by the Onboarding Training Grid to have one-on-one meetings with seasoned employees, new hires get to know the people who make the organization work, gain a variety perspectives on the organization, and ultimately make connections that can improve employee satisfaction, loyalty, and retention.

### Appendix A: The Onboarding Training Grid

Training/Tour Assignment	Purpose	Assigned To
Campus Tour	General Overview	
Chat and E-reference	In-Depth training	
FootPrints/tech help	General Overview	
KC Tour	General Overview	
LibCal	In-Depth training	
LibGuides	In-Depth training	
Profile Photograph	Action	
Research Desk Policies, scheduling, and overview	General Overview	
Research Services Policies & Procedures	General Overview	
Safety And Emergency	General Overview	
Acquisitions	In-Depth training	
at ONE	General Overview	
Core Writing	In-Depth training	
Course Reserves	General Overview	
Database overview: Business	General Overview	
Database overview: Education	General Overview	
Database overview: Engineering	General Overview	
Database overview: GeoScience and GIS	General Overview	
Database overview: Humanities	General Overview	
Database overview: Life Sciences	General Overview	
Database Overview: Music	General Overview	
Database overview: Physics/Chemistry/Math	General Overview	
Database overview: Social Sciences	General Overview	
DLM Tour and overview	General Overview	
Goals and Performance Review	General Overview	

Interlibrary Loan	General Overview	
KC LITA webpage	General Overview	
LibInsight	In-Depth training	
Library Services	General Overview	
Meet the Dean/Admin overview	General Overview	
Meeting with mentor	action	
Nevada Box	General Overview	
ONE Search & Discovery Services (& Ebooks)	In-Depth training	
Printers/photocopiers/scanners/cash to Card/Microforms	General Overview	
Promotion/Tenure, assign mentor	General Overview	
Room Booking	General Overview	
Technology Coordination and Supplies	General Overview	
Workday/Leave/travel	General Overview	
Basic Web Accessibility Training	Action	
Basque Library	General Overview	
Citation Management Programs	In-Depth training	
Collection Development	General Overview	
Digital Initiatives	General Overview	
DLM makerspace	General Overview	
Faculty Committees And Service	General Overview	
Government Documents	General Overview	
MARS	General Overview	
Savitt Library Tour	General Overview	
Scholarly Communications/ScholarWorks/Data Management	General Overview	
Sierra Training	General Overview	
Special Collection/Archives	General Overview	

SYMPA	General Overview	
TLT overview	General Overview	
WebCampus	General Overview	
Website overview	General Overview	

## Appendix B: Onboarding Grid Assessment (New Hire)

1. How valuable was your experience with the Onboarding Grid? (Likert)
2. Do you feel that the topics covered on the grid will be helpful in carrying out your job responsibilities? (Likert)
3. Did you feel that the Onboarding Grid was helpful in becoming acclimated to your new work environment? (Likert)
4. How did the Onboarding Grid compare to other orientation procedures you may have experienced at previous jobs? (free response)
5. How clear did you find the instructions for the Onboarding Grid? (Likert)
6. Did you have difficulty in arranging any meetings? (yes/no)
7. What was the average length of time for each meeting? (multiple choice)
8. Did the meetings feel like an appropriate length of time? (yes/no)
9. What are your thoughts on the timelines to complete tasks (first week, first month, three months)? (free response)
10. Were you able to make any personal connections with contacts from the Onboarding Grid? (yes/no)
11. Did the Onboarding Grid provide you with a better understanding of the organizational structure? (yes/no)
12. Did the Onboarding Grid provide you with a better understanding of the organizational culture? (yes/no)
13. What would you change about the process? Would you add/remove any topics? (free response)
14. What was the most valuable topic(s) for you? (free response)
15. What was the most memorable takeaway(s)/lesson(s)? (free response)
16. What was the least relevant topic(s) for you? (free response)
17. In your words, what is/are the goal(s) of the Onboarding Grid? (free response)
18. Does the Onboarding Grid accomplish those goals? (Likert)
19. Any other comments? (free response)

### Appendix C: Onboarding Grid Assessment (Point-of-Contact)

1. How long have you worked at the Knowledge Center? (free response)
2. What was your Onboarding Grid topic? (free response)
3. How important do you feel it is that New-Hires learn about this topic? (Likert)
4. How long did your meeting(s) last (on average)? (multiple choice)
5. For the given topic, do you feel that this was the appropriate amount of time? (multiple choice)
6. How did you prepare for your meeting? Would you prepare differently in the future? (free response)
7. What did you discuss? (free response)
8. Do you feel the New-Hires were able to grasp the concepts? (multiple choice)
9. Do you feel like you got a chance to get to know the New-Hires? (Likert)
10. What did you learn from them? About them? (free response)
11. Do you feel like the New-Hires got a chance to get to know you? (Likert)
12. Overall, how did you feel your meeting(s) went? (Likert)
13. How valuable did you find this activity for New-Hires? (Likert)
14. How valuable did you find this activity for you? (Likert)
15. How does the Onboarding Grid compare to your own onboarding experience as a new hire? (free response)
16. If it were optional to go through the Onboarding Grid as an experienced employee how likely would you be to sign up? (Likert)
17. What was the most beneficial/valuable aspect to the Onboarding Grid? (free response)
18. What about the Onboarding Grid needs to be changed? (free response)
19. Would you like to see a version of the Onboarding Grid implemented as part of your department's orientation procedures? (multiple choice)
20. In your words, what is/are the goal(s) of the Onboarding Grid? (free response)
21. Does the Onboarding Grid accomplish those goals? (Likert)
22. Any other comments? (free response)

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