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Effective, Efficient, and Fair Conduct in Fire Department Special Assignment Selection Procedures

Eric Mitchell
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Walden University

College of Health Sciences and Public Policy

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Eric Mitchell

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,
and that any and all revisions required by
the review committee have been made.

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Walden University
2022

Abstract

Effective, Efficient, and Fair Conduct in Fire Department Special Assignment Selection

Procedures

by

Eric V. Mitchell

MA, University of North Florida, 2013

BS, University of North Florida, 2010

Professional Administrative Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Public Administration

Walden University

August 2022

Abstract

The client agency's special assignment promotions do not have transparent recruitment processes, resulting in artificial barriers within the noncompetitive ranks. The purpose of this professional administrative study was to explore the limitations associated with artificial barriers to the noncompetitive opportunities within fire departments and whether the removal of the barriers would add to job satisfaction. Data were collected from interviews with ten firefighters ranging from captains to chiefs in competitive and noncompetitive positions within the client agency. The findings from coding and thematic analysis indicated artificial barriers are present in the client agency and are classified as political, constraining systems such as the good old boy system and obstructed policy through the lack of a policy. A remedy for the presence of the artificial barriers is a formal recruitment and installation policy such as that required for the competitive systems. The recruitment policy would include benchmarks and requirements to enter the noncompetitive classes as described in a professional growth and development plan. Well-defined pathways in the client agency could promote positive social change through transparent opportunities throughout the region and collaborative efforts to remove artificial barriers.

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Dedication

To those who contribute daily to developing value in firefighters, keep pressing onward. Although the risk may seem great, the result is a collaborative course of action. We build better fire departments by building better firefighters. The reward is a common purpose. Each level matters. Each rank is just as important as the other. The common purpose of loyalty is hinged on our pursuit of upholding our brother and sister firefighters. May we boldly accept the challenge of leadership.

Acknowledgments

Lord, You are the Source. Thank you to my family for the support and patience in the process. I appreciate your love and consistent prayers. You carried me through. When I had enough, you engaged me to press in for more. Your words of encouragement were my motivation. I cannot express how each slight nudge was enough to keep me moving forward. Remember there is no tapping out. We must finish the work

To my friends and colleagues, thank you. You have been paramount in the development of this study. Your contribution to the work of my study fostered the need for more open professional dialogues. The culture will change when we change the conversations. For the status updates and words of encouragement, thank you. There is nothing like professional motivation. To my Chair Dr. Raj Singh and Committee Member Dr. Kristin Dailey, thank you for your patience and continued guidance. I will always appreciate the process and those who were integral to the completion of this study.

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Section 1: Introduction to the Problem

Artificial Barriers in the client agency

The client agency is a fire department in the United States. Firefighters of the client agency are considered part of the city's civil service system. According to Article 71 of the client agency's city charter, "there shall be a civil service system for the employees of the consolidated government which shall promote effective, efficient and fair conduct of the public business" (City of Jacksonville, n.d. Section 17.01). One role of client's civil service system is to promote effective, efficient, and fair conduct. The need for efficiency, effectiveness, and fair conduct applies to the client agency and all of the civil service system agencies. There is a need for measurement to ensure compliance with all systems' effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness standards. The selection procedures of the client agency's promotional practices are included in the city's civil service system.

The client agency's selection procedures for promotions are competitive and noncompetitive. The competitive promotion process includes a precertification element and a testing element. The precertification element comprises requirements based on the length of time on the job and the firefighter's current position length, also known as the time in grade. Each requirement has a 1-year cycle. The competitive promotional process also requires a series of certification classes varying in length. The competitive process has received controversial reviews, as noted by the judicial implementation of consent decrees (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). One aspect of the latest consent decree dictated the direction of the competitive promotional process and the administration of the selection process of promotions within the client agency. However, the consent decree did not

address the noncompetitive selection process. Recognition of the problematic noncompetitive selection process and differentiating the lack of noncompetitive pathways or requirements for promotion along the noncompetitive path pinpoints barriers within the agency. The presence of artificial barriers in the fire department necessitates artificial barriers in Jacksonville's civil service system. The potential behind this issue is of great significance.

Based on Jacksonville's city charter, public administration postures are built on the foundational concepts of efficiency, fairness, and effectiveness. Foundational values are essential to the business of administration in the client agency. Efficiency, fairness, and effectiveness are measurable concepts in the selection process of promotions. If appropriately governed, this process will result in higher pay, increased responsibility, and higher rank for those accepting promotions. For noncompetitive promotions, there are no available pathways for promotion. The selection process appears random. Without transparency in the selection process of noncompetitive promotions, individuals cannot attest to effectiveness, efficiency, and fairness in the noncompetitive ranking structure.

The client agency's promotional system has been publicly scrutinized and criticized, leading to lawsuits and settlements in the sum of several million dollars (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). The need for transparency in the competitive and noncompetitive promotional system is evidenced by the presence of lawsuits alleging discrimination and counterproductive practices through Jacksonville's promotional system for firefighters. The assessment of the promotional experience and the journey of firefighters within the client agency and the development of their professional dreams related to perceived

opportunities within the selection process of promotions in the noncompetitive rank structure is critical. The projected outcome is a joint effort through a standard operating guideline to define the path to noncompetitive promotions via special assignment.

Problem Statement

When I applied for a job with client agency JFRD, I waited 3 years to get hired. Accepting an employment position with the client agency was an honor. The client agency is one of the largest fire departments in the United States and covers the territory of the largest city in the continental United States. With the high regard for the client agency, there are problems in the promotional system. According to the consent decree, there is an issue of disparity and concerns with artificial barriers in the selection process of the client agency (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). The problem is that the client agency's special assignment promotions do not have transparent recruitment processes resulting in artificial barriers within the noncompetitive ranks. A recent federal lawsuit was filed against the city of Jacksonville due to hiring and promotional processes with the client agency (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). "Many of these problems are the results of entropy (i.e., the disorder and randomness present in a system [1]) created by artificial barriers erected" (Bowlin, 2006, p. 2). The consent decree in 2020 was a product of legal action taken by the Justice Department of the United States. Resolving the issue of artificial barriers within the client agency could assist with remedies to artificial barriers and legal issues surrounding these barriers in the other civil service institutions by creating positive, proactive conversations to institute change. One barrier is there is no clear path to promotion in the noncompetitive rank, making the recruitment process haphazard.

Purpose Statement

In this professional administrative qualitative case study, I explored the perceptions of employees within client agency regarding their promotional experiences relative to the selection process. I researched the use of the selection process in employment processes and evaluated whether employees within client agency viewed their promotional experience as fraught with promotional barriers. Suggestive outcomes may be developed as a part of the research with client agency, which may allow for resolutions to future conflicts through enhanced guidelines for promotion. This research was a basic qualitative study addressing the presence of artificial barriers and the impact on employees of the client agency. The perception of artificial obstacles may be as debilitating as the presence of obstacles. I reviewed regulations for civil service employees and the potential for recruitment processes in the noncompetitive line of promotion.

Alignment with local, state, and federal law is paramount to the successful promotional selection strategies of the client agency. The guiding questions for the study were as follows:

1. How and to what extent are artificial barriers deterring the access and availability of promotional paths into noncompetitive promotional positions?
2. How and to what extent should the selection of noncompetitive positions include a recruitment process?
3. How does the lack of a noncompetitive recruitment process affect morale?

4. How and to what extent are artificial barriers collective bargaining issues present in the noncompetitive selection procedures?
5. Are members of the client agency aware of the selection process for noncompetitive selections?
6. How and to what extent are artificial barriers collective bargaining issues?

The client agency increases efficiency by incorporating industry best practices.

The streamlined effect of efficiency reduces the cost to the city and brands the process as more transparent. To ensure that a more diverse group of applicants has access to the ranks of noncompetitive, special assignments and appointments, revisions to the selection process, including special assignment recruiting policies in the client agency are needed.

Nature of the Study

The study consists of a basic qualitative design. The use of interviews helped me describe the experience of the client agency's members in the client agency's promotional process. The primary data were descriptive and subjective, which was essential to understand the members' experiences. Providing details of the experience to the client organization may broaden the understanding of the issue. Understanding why there is limited access to noncompetitive promotions and recruiting for these positions may benefit the membership of the client agency.

A balanced approach using the dynamic template of qualitative research was intended to promote the study's data and credibility, producing work satisfaction paradigms. It was necessary to include data relevant to the experiences of the client agency's stakeholders. Those involved may become the potent decision makers and

represent those with authority to appoint and assign individuals to the promotional positions. The research may provide information on developing a standard operating guideline for recruiting and assigning personnel to positions in the noncompetitive rank structure.

Significance

The study of artificial promotional barriers in the client agency addressed the presence of artificial barriers in the promotional system. This research may offer insight into institutional gaps within promotional conduits. The study may positively impact the client agency as an organization and the careers of client agency's employees by increasing the awareness of the importance of transparency in selection processes such as special assignments and recruitment for all stakeholders. The presence of barriers to the professional advancement of the employees of the client agency is a violation of the civil services rules and regulations and the collective bargaining agreement. These violations are violations of practicality. Should the client agency decide to implement the resolutions offered by this study or should the client agency determine the study is informative, the outcome of the study may prove beneficial to the client agency's membership by suggesting open initiatives for advancements in the noncompetitive, special assignments.

I also considered the perception of barriers in the promotional system and the length of time the perception of barriers had been active in the promotional processes. Barriers continue to exist because of the lack of an eligibility list, and barriers are supported by dismissing promotion requirements in noncompetitive and special

assignment positions. The findings of this study may provide stakeholders within the department and city with the knowledge to implement change within the client and foster a measure of positive professional change. The study may furnish any individual aspiring to be a member of client agency with an equitable, fair chance of advancement through the noncompetitive ranks. The study may reach beyond the term fairness and promote equity, efficiency, and effectiveness. I considered artificial barriers to the selection process, including competitive positions and noncompetitive appointments. Awareness of artificial promotional barriers in an agency the client's size may demonstrate the potential of bulwarks in other organizations. The information from this study may foster opportunities for change within the region.

Summary

Professional development and growth depend on consistent, transparent points of access. Transparency and information lend to the concept of fairness. One of Jacksonville's rules and regulations of civil service personnel goals is to ensure that all processes are fair. Clarity and a well-defined pathway are essential. The potential for an enriched process and an enhanced career for the fire department members mark the study's significance. Section 2 includes the conceptual framework of the study and provides a background of the current promotional process of noncompetitive promotions and competitive promotions.

Section 2: Conceptual Approach and Background

The client organization uses the selection procedures of competitive examinations and special assignments to promote firefighters. There is not a competitive examination for the special assignment promotions. It is unclear why transparency is applied to competitive examinations while noncompetitive promotions lack transparency. This basic qualitative study addressed employees' perceptions regarding competitive examinations and noncompetitive special assignment promotions. The selection process evaluation in employment processes determines whether employees within client agency view their promotional experience as fraught with promotional barriers. The development of positive promotional outcomes may allow resolutions to future conflicts through developed promotional recruitment and selection guidelines. In this basic research study, I presented artificial barriers as polarizing to employees of the client agency and their careers. The perception of artificial obstacles may be as debilitating as the occurrence of obstacles, which informed the qualitative study's research questions.

Conceptual Framework

The fire service is a process of suppressing fires, managing hazardous materials, and responding to medical emergencies. For promotional purposes, there are two defined processes, which are competitive and noncompetitive. Competitive promotions occur through organized examinations. Noncompetitive promotions occur through appointment or special assignment. The civil service precepts of the City of Jacksonville affirm that the processes shall be effective, efficient, and fair. The measurement of effectiveness,

efficiency, and fairness begins in the process. The process should remove all secrecy and cover-ups, expect difficulties, and look to history for solutions.

The act of covering up an action may become more impactful than the actual act. Hence, the act of concealing artificial barriers is the same notion of openly impeding progress. The conceptual framework of unobstructed, transparent, professional processes governs advancement opportunities through open promotion lines. By removing the notion of cover-ups in the promotional process, the product is transparency in promotional endeavors. Roberts (2020) concluded “municipal fire departments have also experienced considerable difficulty showing job-related relationships between selection instruments and the tasks and duties of firefighters” (p. 1). JFRD can advance beyond the status quo of other municipalities and become the standard for the administration of firefighter opportunities and careers. The idea of obstacles in competitive and noncompetitive promotions imply impediments are present in professional advancement opportunities within the client agency. Transparency also advertises relevancy in the selection procedures. The allowance of fallacies in promotional process blockades demonstrates the weaknesses of organizational structures within the client agency. However, “there is a history of having a selection process to choose firefighters: The use of devices such as tests, oral examination, employment interview in selecting police and fire personnel has a long history in public personnel administration” (Fields et al., 2020, p. 624), and the selection process should have a clear process. Firefighters in client agency deserve the right to proclaim there is a history of having a selection process in the ranks of noncompetitive promotions. The perception of barriers may prevent individuals

from obtaining certain positions and may remove the best candidates from the applicants' pool.

Systemic barriers become societal barriers. The client agency is a microcosm of the city. The ranks of appointed chiefs and those holding positions in noncompetitive special assignments govern the trajectory of client agency as an organization. These individuals become policy dictators and strategists for the community. Advances to reduce discrimination and adverse impact on the community must be taken; hence, efforts to reduce discrimination and adverse impact should be taken within the client agency. Administrations equip their staff through change agent approaches and strategies. "Evidence of adverse impact consists of presenting data" (Fields et al., 2020, p. 625); therefore, someone must ask the tough questions and aspire to remedy any adverse policy impact. Investigating the process before any lawsuits or grievances is critical to developing an equitable, efficient, and effective policy.

The policy dictators are the voice of the fire department to all stakeholders. As the promotional selection process stands in JFRD, Jacksonville's citizens and stakeholders are not afforded the best, most vetted candidates and are forced to embrace a marginalized selection. The study may inform all stakeholders of the presence of barriers and provide a resolution to the obstacles. Qualitative methodology was essential to this study to frame how artificial barriers have impacted individuals. Ripley (1994) stated that the selection process's goal is to "remove secrecy and mystique" (p. 1). The selection process with transparency may remove secrecy and the mystique currently associated with noncompetitive special assignments' selection procedures. The client agency's

members should associate their promotional opportunities with fairness competitively and noncompetitively.

Relevance to Public Organization

One purpose of the study is to inform the significant stakeholders of the research findings and contribute to organizational legitimacy through shared experiences in the ranks of competitive and noncompetitive promotions (see Locke et al., 2014). Noting the size of the fire department in Jacksonville, the client agency is one of the larger fire departments in the region. The organization is an industry standard for selection processes and advancement opportunities. The client agency's status heightens the importance of the awareness of artificial barriers in client agency. A qualitative study was essential to frame how artificial barriers have impacted individuals within the fire department.

The problem of artificial barriers in the selection process of the client organization has been responded to through litigation channels. The use of grievances and lawsuits has been the response to the presence of perceived artificial barriers in the selection process. The resulting outcome has resulted in an individual promotion or a singular appointment but has not translated to systemic change. The problem persists regarding who has the responsibility of creating a pathway. I investigated the responsibility of all stakeholders, including the collective bargaining agent. Artificial barriers could be seen as a managerial policy and not a collective bargaining issue. Ottosen and Roeschley (2006) stated "essentially, the distinction between matters that were found to be mandatory bargaining subjects and those that were not was one of substance and procedure" (p. 2). Another

objective was to explore the substance and procedure of the selection process and how it applies to the managerial aspects and the collective bargaining aspect. Ottosen and Roeschley also found “the mechanics and procedures of promotional testing were found to be mandatory bargaining issues, while the substantive issues surrounding how exams are designed, administered, and graded were determined not to be mandatory bargaining issues” (p. 3).

In Illinois, there is a concept introduced as the Firefighter Promotion Act. Introducing the current study’s findings may open a new chapter for the client organization by creating a system for recruiting and evaluating potential supervisors. Scholarly articles suggested the issue is with the promotional examination. I explored the selection process of noncompetitive appointments and examined whether the system works the way it was designed to work according to managerial preference or through collective bargaining restrictions. The current state of practice in the noncompetitive assembly of promotions of the client organization lacks a straightforward promotional process and requires a better option for promotion.

Organizational Background and Context

The client agency is one of the busiest fire departments in the country. The client agency boasts more than 150,000 calls a year, with 65 fire stations and a staff of nearly 2,000 uniformed and nonuniformed personnel (EMS World, 2019). The client agency is one of the country’s largest fire departments and covers the largest city territory in the continental United States. The 2018 consent decree addressed disparity and concerns with artificial barriers in the selection process of the JFRD (My JFRD Duval County, Florida,

2020). The selection procedure for noncompetitive promotional positions within the client agency needs clarification. There has been a federal lawsuit against client agency due to hiring and promotional processes within the client agency (City of Jacksonville, n.d.).

The concept of entropy relates to the concept of disorder or randomness. Entropy in the selection process facilitates the impression of barriers through the randomness of noncompetitive special assignment selection. Random selection typifies the current noncompetitive promotional process without clear pathways. The absence of an official resolution or removal of artificial promotional barriers may lead to other lawsuits. This study was essential because the client agency functions as an agency in the public sector and must abide by state and federal laws. One goal is to provide a system free of barriers in the selection process of noncompetitive promotions or barriers misaligned with federal and state laws.

The client agency's promotional system constitutes competitive and noncompetitive positions. The competitive promotional system includes an examination procedure. For the competitive ranks, these written examinations lead to an eligibility list. According to IAFF Contract, Section 13.4 (2018), "all persons with a passing score shall be ranked by resulting numerical score, with the person attaining the highest score ranked first. The top name of the list shall be certified first" (p. 17). This is a concept of the rule of one. The rule of one necessitates that the highest score on the eligibility test is promoted first. Firefighters within the JFRD who participate in competitive examinations are aware of testing requirements and their position on an eligibility list.

The noncompetitive positions are initiated through an appointment process without an eligibility list. Without an eligibility list or a requirements list, promotions can be problematic, suggesting the existence of artificial barriers and obstructions to advancements within the noncompetitive ranks. The lack of transparency indicates the potential for organizational injustice, grievances, and lawsuits. Limited research exists surrounding the problematic presence of barriers and the ineffective new remedies in the selection process of the client agency. The current study may offer insight into firefighter promotional experiences and their perception of artificial promotional barriers.

The client agency as the emergency medical and fire services provider for the city. According to the City of Jacksonville (n.d.), the client agency comprises five divisions with nearly 2,000 employees. The divisions are Operations, Rescue, Emergency Preparedness, Training, and Prevention. Daily administrative duties of each division are assigned through a rank-and-file chain-of-command system. The system is classified as a paramilitary, hierarchical, bureaucratic structure. I considered the regulatory structure of the client agency, which comprises uniformed firefighters primarily. Although the client agency employs approximately 100 nonuniformed personnel, these individuals were not considered in this study because they are not a part of the firefighter promotional process competitively or noncompetitively.

The uniformed firefighters are civil servants holding the certification of state-certified firefighters. For the uniformed firefighters, there are two ways to promote: (a) through the selection process of competitive examinations or (b) through the noncompetitive, special assignment selection process of appointment. The competitive

design includes a test with an official ranking, while the noncompetitive position does not. The competitive design is the traditional path of promotion for most uniformed firefighters.

Using the rank-and-file system, the client agency currently accommodates 70 noncompetitive, appointed positions. Through the director fire chief, the office of the mayor selects these positions through random selection and without a conventional selection promotional process. Generally, these noncompetitive appointments receive a special assignment, as defined by the Collective Bargaining Agreement and the City of Jacksonville Civil Service Rules and Regulations for Civil Service Personnel. Special assignments can include a city vehicle with fuel provisions, a 10% increase in pay, and a different shift based on 40-hours rather than the 56-hour shift (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). The client agency staffs fire stations with many of its operating employees on a 56-hour work schedule. Noncompetitive, special assignment appointments to the rank of chief include all of the perks and an increase in pay with a chief status promotion. The City of Jacksonville Civil Service Rules and Regulations for Civil Service Personnel, the Collective Bargaining Agreement of the local fire department union, and the Department of Employee Services offer support guidelines to administrate the selection process of examination within client agency.

The use of examinations in the selection process configures the nonappointed positions within the rank-and-file command structure by creating numerically organized promotional lists based on the test scores. As part of the selection process, the promotional list provides transparency to the competitive promotional process.

Promotional lists advise on the status of those being promoted and where testers rank according to other applicants. For noncompetitive promotions, the city charter mandates efficient, effective, and fair business in civil service processes. The noncompetitive promotion is without a definitive, transparent application process for appointed special assignment positions and a clear selection process. Transparency through eligibility lists and job requirements would provide a measure of clarity to noncompetitive promotions and those pursuing these promotions. There are no mandated promotional lists to select noncompetitive appointees for appointed positions, including director/fire chief's rank. In essence, there is an entire promotional system with artificial barriers in place supported by the JFRD. The assignment of job requirements, promotional examinations, and eligibility lists would promote an open selection process.

Understanding the promotional processes afforded to employees of the client agency would provide all parties involved insight into their rights as civil service employees. The fundamentals of the selection processes include methods to achieve employment procedures such as hiring, promotions, training, and assignments. The underlying implementation of the selection process addresses the nature of employment processes, procedures, and decisions. Using a selection process fashions professional expectations by creating a pathway that enlightens workers to the pathway's presence and potentially reduces grievances and lawsuits.

Lawsuits and grievances are filed because of imperfections in the selection process and the contention that those shortcomings lead to discriminatory practices or some form of barrier (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). Disparities in the special assignment

appointments to noncompetitive promotional positions begin with the lack of a transparent or open process, including an eligibility list. Emotionally and psychologically, disparities in promotional opportunities can be draining as lawsuits and grievances push emotional limits. Emotional exhaustion, which leads to work conflict from the lack of opportunity, is as debilitating as exhaustion from overexertion. Excess emotional exhaustion leads to burnout. Smith et al. (2018) stated “burnout significantly impacts firefighter safety performance” (p. 1). The lack of opportunities can lead to safety performance issues that transcend the testing cycle.

Appointments or noncompetitive positions are called “special,” which suggests these appointments are unique and above the traditional firefighter’s average jobs. The special assignment presents those fortunate enough to obtain these positions with a broader view of the department and further insight into the business of the city. Exposure to more professional accolades, financial growth, personal and professional growth equates to a satiated career, provoking positive outcomes during and after one’s career. The study queries the possibility of those without special assignments and their view of opportunities given with special assignment titles. Smith et al. (2018) advised, “both work stress and work-family conflict predicted burnout and burnout negatively influenced personal protective equipment compliance, adherence to safe work practices, and safety reporting and communication” (p.1). The atmosphere of compliance with clear opportunities in the noncompetitive special assignments can reduce burnout.

The administration of the client agency and the director/fire chief are responsible for overseeing the promotional process. The director/fire chief is in command of the

employees of the client agency. The term “command” is used to determine which individual is in charge. The director/fire chief governs the employees and the daily operations within the client agency. The Department of Employee Services oversees the selection process with the director/fire chief’s direction. I considered administrative decisions to use transparent selection processes in one avenue of promotion or the competitive promotions and the administrative refusal to use an open process in noncompetitive special assignment. Regulatory decisions in the client agency reduce the level of professional satisfaction, growth, and financial opportunities within the client agency the city. Because multiple variations in the selection process exist, such as promotional lists in competitive examinations and the lack of promotional lists in noncompetitive promotions, there have been legal ramifications, resulting in skewed fairness perceptions. Intentionality in the selection procedures is essential. In reference to public employees and their approach to selection procedures, Roberts (2020) concludes, “devote more resources to the development of valid, merit-based assessment procedures that do not have a disparate impact on members of protected groups” (p.1). Asymmetrical fairness can increase the professional harm of employees linking the client agency and the city to an avoidable concept of institutional bias by artificial promotional barriers.

Artificial promotional barriers include artificial barriers that manifest in various forms. “Some barriers are artificial in nature, meaning that they are imposed from external authority and would not exist without that imposition. Others are more natural, barriers that occur without external imposition and typically exist on an individual level” (Wilterdink, 2018, p5.). Since civil service aims to present an effective, efficient, and fair

service, removing any barriers would promote a more promising path to this goal. For this study, an artificial barrier is a barrier that cannot be seen but is human made, which obstructs forward mobility, thus making the path for entry into the next professional grade difficult.

Artificial promotional barriers are systemic and interwoven in the cultural exchanges of an organization. Artificial barriers are internal barriers specific to an individual based upon mental obstacles and perceptions of opportunities or the lack thereof afforded to that individual. Artificial barriers are environmental barriers based on the systematic cultural development of promotion preparation opportunities within the fire stations and daily routines. For example, certain fire stations have busier routines than other fire stations. In a culture of bravado and alphas, these busier stations are seen in a positive light and with influence. These stations are more politically inclined based upon location and history, which leads to the biased perception of access, privilege, and barriers. I investigated the systemic artificial boundaries of the client agency in its promotional processes, those competitive and noncompetitive, and inquired about individual artificial barriers through the perceived presence of obstacles upheld by the client agency's use of the selection process. I considered whether members understand artificial barriers as actual obstacles or perceived obstacles that preclude upward mobility. I investigated the client agency's selection process and its adherence to the Uniform Guideline of the Selection Process established by the EEOC and industry standards.

The study's basis was not to conclude that these barriers are discriminatory, as there are agencies in place to determine if discrimination has been allowed to function. Agencies such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, a federal agency that establishes and mandates uniform national instruction on the selection process to reduce discrimination. There are federal, state laws and the client agency's internal policies to reduce discrimination in the selection process. The presence of regulations and guidelines cultivate hope in alleviating the mismanagement of the employment process. Modern industry standards set higher thresholds of transparency and reduce the number of artificial barriers. I investigated the levels at which personnel believe artificial barriers exist and if their existence is the norm of systemic selection processes within the client agency often classified as routine or happenstance. Ultimately, throughout one's career, the influence one has is leverage collectively and individually. Individuals find a balance between opposing sides, understanding that we may not agree on everything; however, we take comfort in the common ground for the success of all without the presence of any barrier, artificial or otherwise. Resolutions to current and past artificial promotional barriers may reduce the need for future lawsuits and grievances. This study may be essential to the client agency because of the functional capacity of the client agency as an agency in the public sector, receiving federal funding and a mandate to abide by local, state, and federal laws.

The promotional system is the facilitator of competitive and noncompetitive appointment positions. An examination process establishes the competitive portion of the selection process. For the competitive ranks, there are written examinations that lead to

an eligibility list. The rule of one determines those promoted. The rule of one necessitates that the highest score on the eligibility test is promoted first. As previously discussed, the noncompetitive positions are undertaken through an appointment process without an eligibility list. A firefighter for the special assignment position is chosen, which means there must be a form of recruitment. The Civil Service Personnel Rules and Regulations advise, "Recruiting shall be designed to reach all segments of the population," and the recruiting program shall be carried out in a manner that assures open competition and provides for the opportunity to meet affirmative action goals by the employing agencies in accordance with Equal Employment Opportunity and other applicable laws" (Targetsolutions.com/jaxfr, n.d.). Promotions with formal recruitment and without an eligibility list or a requirements list can be problematic and compel the notion of artificial barriers and obstructions to advancements within the noncompetitive ranks.

Role of the DPA Student/Researcher

I have been employed with the client agency for twenty years. My current rank and position is captain. My current position is a special assignment promotion. I have held two special assignment positions throughout my career, and each has offered huge professional benefits to my career. My role in the study project is to offer a better option of recruitment and appointments to the special assignment promotions by transparency and opportunity. My motivation is to add to the brand of client agency by offering an enhanced recruitment and appointment process designed to better the experience of those within the fire department. I have alleviated my personal bias by focusing on the response of those in the fire department and having a diverse group of participants is essential to

remove the stigma of bias. Purity to the process is added by dictating the experience and supporting the outcome without alterations to the study.

Summary

The deficiency of transparency spearheads the potential for organizational injustice, grievances, and lawsuits. Limited research exists surrounding the problematic presence of barriers and the sterile solution of new remedies in the selection process of the client agency. An alignment between client agency and this research will offer insight into firefighter's promotional experiences and their perception of artificial promotional barriers. The essential portion of the study was data gained through the participants' experiences. Collecting the data of experiences shared the story of how artificial barriers are viewed in the client agency.

Section 3: Data Collection Process and Analysis

The problem is that the special assignment promotions do not have transparent recruitment processes resulting in artificial barriers within the noncompetitive ranks. In this professional administrative qualitative case study, I explored the observations of employees within client agency regarding their promotional experience relative to the selection process. The client agency has nearly 551 competitive officer positions and roughly 50 noncompetitive promotional opportunities. The competitive and noncompetitive promotional process is included in the client agency's \$317 million budget. The bulk of the client agency's promotional process is accomplished through competitive applications. However, the client agency has approximately 50 noncompetitive promotional positions filled without a recruitment process or pathway into these positions. The noncompetitive positions offer an increase of 10% on top of the typical 15% competitive promotion (City of Jacksonville, n.d.). Section 3 includes the practice-focused questions, sources of evidence, and the process of implementing the study.

Practice-Focused Questions

The organizational problem relates to the lack of promotional pathways and perceived acceptance of artificial barriers in the process of noncompetitive promotions. The acceptance is not simply managerial but also a matter of collective bargaining. I explored the potential of bridging the gap between organizational barriers, collective bargaining barriers, and informed career choices within the client organization. The study produced outcomes in the form of a deliverable that other agencies may use to ensure

artificial barriers are not part of the civil service organizations, including the fire departments. Understanding individuals' experiences and their time in the client organization may enable the client organization to see the careers through the lens of their employees. As part of this qualitative study, members of the client organization were surveyed to evaluate their experience with the promotional process, including the noncompetitive selection process, and their experience with the collective bargaining process. I explored the story of each firefighter and how the process had impacted their career.

Qualitative methodology aligned with the practice-focused questions by allowing individuals to provide their experiences and attest to whether barriers exist. This qualitative study addressed how members of the client organization view their promotional processes and selection procedures. I explored how members of the client organization make sense of their world within the client agency, including the collective bargaining process. The information provided from the study may allow the client organization to develop different strategies through the application of clarity and transparency in the selection procedures.

Operational Definitions

The City of Jacksonville, Florida Civil Service, and Personnel Rules and Regulations (2020) defined the competitive class and noncompetitive class as follows:

Competitive class: A class in which selection of applicants for filling of vacancies is based on the results of an assembled or unassembled examination. Competitive classes have specific, job-related requirements.

Noncompetitive class: A labor -intensive class that does not require an examination for filling of vacancies. A noncompetitive class is designated in the class specification by having entrance requirements.

Competitive and noncompetitive are classifications or designations of position designed for examination purposes. Competitive examinations are categorized based on the type of assembly. Competitive examinations are unassembled and assembled. Unassembled examinations measure education, training, and experience. For the city of Jacksonville, competitive, assembled examinations include written, performance, assessment centers; physical agility; or performance tests. The assembly is defined as promotional positions obtained through a defined series of operational pathways and promotions obtained through an examination. Noncompetitive is defined as a selection process without a pathway or recruitment process, and placement is based on random selection (City of Jacksonville, Florida Civil Service, and Personnel Rules and Regulations, 20208).

Research Questions

1. How and to what extent are artificial barriers deterring the access and availability of promotional paths into noncompetitive promotional positions?
2. How and to what extent should the selection of noncompetitive positions include a recruitment process?
3. How does the lack of a noncompetitive recruitment process affect morale?

Sources of Evidence

Identifying firefighter concerns with competitive and noncompetitive advancement processes was pivotal. Smith et al. (2018) found a correlation between burnout and emotional exhaustion. Emotional burnout is a safety concern for firefighters. The lack of available opportunities due to artificial barriers can produce emotional burnout. Without pathways for advancement, an expected presence of emotional burnout and increased performance safety concerns may occur. I explored whether this had been part of the experience of JFRD firefighters.

Lack of awareness of the experience of firefighters could lead the client agency to be subject to unintentional discrimination and disparate impact because there is no pathway or system of checks and balances. Mitchell (2013) suggested that an unmonitored process leads to discrimination even if it is unintentional, resulting in morale issues. This evidence was critical to the purpose of the study because the evidence could point toward the cause of negative experiences of the client organization's personnel, which would suggest the need for the study. The deliverable would provide a suggested pathway with a recruitment aspect as a standard operating guideline.

Evidence Generated for the Administrative Study

The bulk of the evidence generated for this study came from the interview group. The interviews addressed the presence of artificial barriers and potential avenues to remedy artificial barriers. The deliverable for the client organization will be in the form of a presentation and a memo of the study results. Firefighters from the client organization participated in the interview and were classified based on their experience

levels and experience in competitive and noncompetitive assemblies. The group of interviewees consisted of representatives from the rank of firefighter, including firefighter, engineer, lieutenant, captain, and chief. The study was not based on the quantity of participants. However, the quality of those describing the phenomenon of artificial barriers assisted in developing findings that were used to create the deliverable.

Participants

Participants for the interview group were selected based on career tenure with the client organization and rank. I recruited individuals who had obtained the rank of captain or higher within the client agency. The goal was to obtain a diverse participant pool. However, the participant group was subject to the availability of those in the competitive ranks and those in the noncompetitive ranks. I explored the experience of those within the agency, which was critical to study. The criteria to participate in the interview process included 10 years of service, completion of one promotional exam, and awareness of noncompetitive assembly (i.e., special assignment or appointment).

Participants included a diverse group of 10 participants. The interview group included men and women of diverse backgrounds from the competitive and noncompetitive ranks of firefighter through chief. Those interviewed had an opportunity to discuss their experiences in the promotional system of the client organization via a virtual platform. The interview process consisted of recommendations to the client organization to develop an outcome in the form of a memo on the presence of artificial barriers and a recommendation for a formal standard operating guideline recommendation. The standard operating guideline would highlight the need for internal

recruitment and a formal process for promotion through the noncompetitive assembly. Standard operating guidelines would be reviewed annually through the Training Division to ensure efficiency, effectiveness, and fairness.

Procedures

The data collection consisted of descriptive qualitative research methods to interpret the data using thematic analysis. It was vital to ascertain and express the issues of members of the client organization to the client organization and determine any patterns. The unit of analysis was the selection procedure of noncompetitive assemblies. The client organization may not be aware of the measure of artificial barriers present in their agency. The numerical analysis of a quantitative study would suggest what is already present and that random selection exists in the noncompetitive selection procedures. However, the client organization must be aware of how the random selection procedures affect the client organization's members. Qualitative methods such as interviews aligned with the client's need by allowing further exploration of the unit of analysis.

The selection of the participants was through purposive sampling strategies, including criterion sampling. All participants worked for the client organization or had worked for the organization. All efforts were made to give purpose to the sample selection and size of the interview group by adding the criteria of the rank of captain or greater, and consideration for years of service. These individuals would have had an opportunity to take a promotion examination competitively and would have been aware of the noncompetitive process. The human resource department of the client organization

provided a list of all personnel within the client organization who had attained promotion through competitive and noncompetitive assemblies. The interview opportunity was distributed randomly throughout the client organization to those on the list with the rank of captain or greater. Selection for the interview list was made from the employee list given by the human resource agent to attain participants from each rank and build a diverse participant group that satisfied the selection criteria. Participation in the interview was voluntary. The inclusive method encompassed firefighters who had been promoted from all divisions, including the competitive and noncompetitive systems, which was critical to offer a well-rounded view. All aspects of the study were intended to be completed virtually; however, if the participant requested to complete the interview in person, that option was available.

The qualitative study addressed the story of firefighters. The qualitative study was designed to convey the richness of the firefighters' experience and assist the client agency in determining whether any adjustments based on the deliverable would better serve the firefighters. The analysis of the stories of members of the client agency may reveal new viewpoints to management. The newly revealed viewpoints may prove beneficial to the client agency. The data collection process comprised six components: recruitment from the human resource list of noncompetitive promotions and competitive promotions, implementation of the interview process, data collection, data analysis, and formation of the final deliverable in the form of a recommendation memorandum to the client organization. As a part of the study, the interview process addressed whether participants were aware of noncompetitive assemblies. The bulk of the data, including the

deliverable, was produced with the consideration of the interview group. The timeline for the data collection was 1 week. If possible and noting the concerns of COVID-19, the interviews were completed virtually. The final deliverable was completed after data from the interview group were ascertained. All interview processes and data were collected upon institutional review board approval (12-17-21-0743114) and consistent with security concerns.

Protections

Each participant signed a consent form before participating in the interview. Developing a working relationship free from reprisal was imperative; hence, individual interviews were conducted. The ethical protection of the participants was of utmost priority. Participants' consent forms also included a provision for each participant to withdraw from the interview at any stage in the process. Protections were in place to conceal the identity of those participating in the interviews by removing the name requirement and further masking the identity of participants. Participants were asked to provide a personal email address for interview information distribution and communications efforts. Participants were also asked to complete the interview away from the client agency. The interview link was sent to each participant's personal email as identification of the participant. The client agency had given clearance to complete the study, so the client's awareness was expected. All data will be stored in a locked file at the client organization's headquarters without identifying any of the study's participants.

Analysis

The data analysis component of the qualitative study included the concepts of system dynamics, including acknowledging the value of mental databases. This portion of the study provided for responses to the research questions. Akcam et al. (2019) stated “qualitative data have been an important information source for the System Dynamics field since its inception” (p. 2). I used the concept of databases when databases are points of reference and

something that is given from being experientially encountered, and material serving as a basis for discussion, inference, or determination of policy and detailed information of any kind which is important to this study because everyone’s encounter shapes their recognition of artificial barriers. (Akcam et al., 2019, p. 2)

For the qualitative study, the brain’s control center and mind offer important modeling about one’s perception of a structure’s policy and behaviors of individuals in various systems and can be analyzed using thematic analysis.

The mental database or one’s thought process after an experience offers important modeling information. The experience determines mental concepts, discernment of policies, and how individuals behave in the system. A person’s mental database can be the largest source of data to demonstrate patterns and themes. Using a thematical analysis system, the themes and patterns in the data were consequential. Based on the coding, similar themes or patterns were identified. Each pattern was analyzed to demonstrate the measure of the existence of artificial barriers. Once the initial set of coding occurred with

similar themes, those themes were placed into broader themes to identify the impact of each narrow theme. The themes were documented as evidence, and the findings are used to create a deliverable addressing the themes.

Providing opportunities for the participants' perception allowed the use of mental data supporting the qualitative methods. Using interviews and asking open-ended questions removed the boundaries of closed-ended questions and allowed for the information stored in the participants' mental databases to be articulated, which assisted in articulating various themes. The interview group discussed and expressed the data of their experience. The description of the encounters with artificial barriers, whether positive or negative, provided the data. The systems used for data collection included a computer, Google Sheets, a pen, a recorder, and Microsoft Word to document findings and patterns.

Saturation was of concern for the qualitative study. During data collection, consideration was given to the amount of data, the number of participants, and the number of interviews. Once saturation was obtained, the interview and data collection process were complete. Burkholder et .al (2016) describes saturation as "relevant and occurring when continued data collection does not add new themes or patterns but instead reinforces what has been derived from the previous data analysis" (p. 147). Although I could not pinpoint when saturation would occur, I projected the saturation process would occur within ten interviews. If saturation was not attained in ten interviews, the interview process would have continued until saturation occurred. To increase the trustworthiness

of the qualitative design, dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability was used.

Using the concept of dependability, I considered the concept of the of consistency in the qualitative study. The notion of dependability encapsulated a repetition of work in the same manner, yielding similar if not identical results. Dependability is the extent of consistency related to the finding and whether other researchers would agree with the legitimacy of the findings. The interview questions are asked to consider an outsider's perspective as well. Other researchers could understand the results even if they disagree with the findings. Reporting the information ensured other researchers have a transparent look into the findings.

To ensure the data is believable and answers the research question, credibility was considered. According to Burkholder, et .al (2016) "credibility is established using prolonged engagement, peer debriefing, persistent observation, negative analysis, progressive subjectivity, member checking, triangulation and reflexivity (p. 150). This study used prolonged engagement and subjectivity to build credibility. Prolonged engagement included being a member of fire services and having experience in the fire services field for more than 20 years. Having engaged in the fire service for more than 20 years, I have built up trust and rapport, removed any misunderstandings, and understood the fire service's culture and jargon. Prolonged subjectivity required the limitation of biases in the study. Although opinions are difficult to remove after working in the field, the data needed to answer the research questions beyond any biases. The greatest asset to

removing any bias recognized the subjectivity prior to the study, during, and post the study through peer review.

Describing the setting of the study and any potential assumptions associated with the study correlated to the term transferability, which is beneficial in determining trustworthiness in the qualitative study. Participants will provided data through Zoom in which ever atmosphere the participants decide to remove any potential for any negative pressure. Participants were given an opportunity to discontinue the interview process at any time and participants had an opportunity to share as much information as they felt necessary or as little. Once saturation was obtained the study was complete. To further support transferability, maximum variation in the participant pool was used. Invitations to participate in the study were extended to a diverse population pool within the client agency.

Researcher bias was a concern in a qualitative study. Confirmability assists in addressing the subjective aspects of this study. Burkholder et.al (2016) stated, “qualitative research admits research subjectivity, but its methods must be based on verifiable procedures, analyses, and conclusions” (p. 152). A single verifiable method is the reproduction of data by another researcher and the expectation of another researcher achieving the same results after reviewing the data with the inclusion of audit trails. Audit trails can be comprised through the secured data reflecting the response by the participant pool. The audit trails assess confirmability and further support the dependability of the study.

Summary

The summation of the data explained the participant's assessment of artificial barriers during their tenure with the client agency. Measures were taken to protect the data and all parties involved. Defining the assembly of competitive and noncompetitive compilations increases the understanding of the problem and bridges the solution pathways. Understanding the difference in the promotional pathways was crucial to access the noncompetitive promotional system. The analysis and evaluation experiences assisted in guiding the creation of the deliverable for the client organization, along with recommendations to assist the client organization in removing artificial barriers. The gaps in the knowledge center around the concept of artificial barriers and the potential impact of the barriers on the client agency's members.

Section 4: Evaluation and Recommendations

The problem is that the client agency has two means of promotional processes with a clear pathway in only one process. The advancement processes are through competitive and noncompetitive means; however, the competitive process is transparent, while the noncompetitive process is not transparent. The competitive process includes a governed process and pathway, while the noncompetitive process does not have a pathway, resulting in artificial barriers through the lack of policy. In this professional administrative qualitative case study, I explored the observations and experiences of employees within the client agency with particular interest regarding their promotional experience relative to the selection procedures in the noncompetitive promotional process.

Practice-Focused Questions

I explored the potential and benefits of a transparent promotional process for the noncompetitive positions within the client agency, the collective bargaining agent, and the informed members of the client organization. I produced a deliverable that may benefit other agencies with similar artificial barriers. The study provided findings that other agencies may use to ensure artificial barriers are not part of their civil service organizations, including their fire departments. This professional administrative qualitative case study addressed the perceptions of employees within the client agency regarding their promotional experience with noncompetitive selection processes and which measures are necessary to remove artificial barriers.

Sources of Evidence

The sources of evidence of the study came from members of the client agency. The participating members included captains and district chiefs in competitive and noncompetitive positions within the client agency. The sample group comprised men and women from multiple races who were appointed and nonappointed members. The identities and any other classifications were not expressed for confidentiality reasons. The data were obtained through interviews. The interviews were completed virtually using the Zoom platform, except for one participant who requested to meet in person. The interviews were completed away from the client agency and at the scheduled convenience of the participants.

Data saturation is attained when no themes or patterns are discovered, and more data obtained further support the previous data collected. According to Burkholder et al. (2016), “saturation is based on two criteria, (a) continued analysis yields no new information and (b) there are no unexplained phenomena” (p. 148). For this study, saturation was reached when the data collected were sufficient to answer the research questions and no new information or unexplained phenomena occurred. Saturation occurred after interview seven. Using coding and thematic analysis, I summarized and categorized the evidence. The evidence produced themes of barriers based on centralization of acceptance of artificial barriers in noncompetitive opportunities, and the phenomenon of organizational culture.

Findings and Implications

The study's data produced the findings to understand the phenomenon of artificial barriers in the client agency. The findings indicated how members of the client agency attempted to make sense of one aspect of their promotional experiences within the client agency. The findings depicted client agency members' experiences in the noncompetitive promotional process and how they compared the competitive and noncompetitive processes. Participants passively accepted the lack of a promotional process for the noncompetitive positions with a reluctant acceptance of artificial barriers within the client agency. The client agency has a process for members to grieve matters deemed unfair or violations of the client agency's policy or violation of the city's policy. Although there is a grievance process, the acceptable progression in noncompetitive promotions is the acceptance of artificial barriers. The primary themes of lack of transparency, lack of responsibility, and acceptance of barriers were evidenced through the data collected in the study.

The participants answered the interview questions in various positions and locations. Participants were sitting down in certain locations, including a couch, a recliner, and a desk, while completing the interview. The participants, all certified firefighters, were in layperson's clothes except for one. Completing the study uniform free was each participant's choice; however, it represented a separation from the client agency and freedom for each participant to express their personal views. Creating an environment fostering freedom of expression was an essential aspect of the study.

Research Responses

Research Question 1

How and to what extent are artificial barriers deterring the access and availability of promotional paths into noncompetitive promotional positions? Participant 1 expressed the pathway into noncompetitive positions as nonexistent and could not explain the pathway after being approached for two noncompetitive positions. Participant 1 had more than 10 years on the job and had obtained the rank of captain. Participant 2 was unable to explain the availability of pathways and stated they could not explain the availability because of a lack of consistent guidelines on how people are selected for noncompetitive positions. Participant 2 expressed the belief that most people within the department do not possess the knowledge of how most people are selected for noncompetitive positions. Participant 2 emphasized most people have no idea.

Participant 3 added there is nothing written that explains the promotional pathway. Participant 3 viewed the lack of a written policy as a barrier to the noncompetitive pathway. Participant 4 could not explain the process to enter a noncompetitive promotion because no pathways existed, including no preferred qualifications for any position. Participant 4 added the concept of politics playing a pivotal role of entrance into the noncompetitive positions. Participant 4 stated “politics is the end all, be all,” creating a new category and removing the notion of a complete barrier. Participant 4 advised the barrier is a barrier of politics, which is not artificial and is an actual barrier and a deterrence into noncompetitive promotional spaces.

Research Question 2

How and to what extent should the selection of noncompetitive positions include a recruitment process? Participant 1 denied experiencing artificial barriers in the competitive process; however, some aspects need to be altered to make the process efficient and effective. In terms of the noncompetitive process, cultural barriers hinder different demographics in their progress in the fire department. Participant 1 stated that lack of familiarity with a “certain group” or conditioning toward a “certain group” caused difficulty in accepting different cultures in the fire department. The lack of a recruitment process allows some barriers and constitutes a conditioned outfit that does not provide for a recruitment process. Participant 2 expressed there is no tangibility, no guideline, no policy, or no procedure that outlines the administration’s role or the role of the union in any of these processes. It was unclear what role each entity plays in the noncompetitive process outside of the final appointment, when people show up on a bulletin and in a position. A written policy, including recruitment, is necessary to make the process tangible.

Participant 3 classified the recruitment process as “tricky” and political. Participant 3 clarified that there is not a pool of people. The recruit is “handpicked,” and Participant 3 could not explain any recruitment process because it did not exist. The process is political and based on relationships. Opportunity is based on relationships and politics, not merit. A recruitment process would bring validity to the noncompetitive process. Participant 4 assessed transparency in the competitive process and advised members to know what is required. Participant 4 noted that members should know the

requirements for noncompetitive processes and how the recruitment process works. Adding a recruitment process would limit the sentiments of being overlooked when members feel they are more qualified than others for noncompetitive positions. For competitive promotions, members are aware of the requirements to enter the competitive positions. In the noncompetitive positions, it does not matter how talented members are or what they are capable of because members are not aware of the process to enter the noncompetitive positions. Participant 4 advised “it seems unfair and lacking in equality how people are chosen for noncompetitive positions and unfair to choose members for an appointment without an official.” Participant 4 noted the competitive promotional process is written out.

Research Question 3

How does the lack of a noncompetitive recruitment process affect morale?

Participant 1 stated the recruitment process is vague and political, and it is all about whom you know and not what you know, which negatively impacts morale. The recruitment process depends on the circles people are a part of for the noncompetitive side. The process should be spelled out to make it fairer. People would experience more fairness throughout the organization if the noncompetitive side were spelled out. Clarity in the process would allow people a chance to choose. Some feel it is not an option because the choice is being suppressed by not making the process known. Participant 2 expressed dissatisfaction with artificial barriers and felt artificial barriers play a huge role through lack of transparency, harmful traditions, and things that hinder people, especially women, as a part of cultural and organizational barriers. Participant 2 suggested that

members must navigate the challenges of a biased tradition, and upholding the current process adds to the muddiness. The department is not structured to be an equal opportunity organization. In the public eye, it does not appear management's efforts to address barriers are visible. The response is always reactive and not proactive; hence, lawsuits occur frequently within the fire department. In essence, members must fight for an opportunity to succeed.

Participant 3 advised that members do not know the selection process. There had been interviews, but those being interviewed were handpicked through some method. There is no formal succession plan in place, and the plan in place appears to be political. It is favoritism to a degree, and politics has everything to do with it. The implications are detrimental to the morale of the department. Participant 4 stated it is discouraging, and although this may sound bad and may come off bad, the noncompetitive positions are a breed of nepotism and the "good old boy system." The system is completely political. Nothing in place ensures the department is getting the best candidate for the position, which is a barrier. It is discouraging if the person does not have money to donate to a campaign; then that individual is deemed less than qualified for a position that they might be more than qualified for.

Data Coding

For the data analysis, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding were used. I developed categories for common and repetitive themes emerging from the client organization's noncompetitive promotional process with the concepts of themes and classifications developed from experiences shared across the participant base.

Themes and Categories

The political theme/actual barrier category was noted because members of the organization must pay to have access to the noncompetitive positions. The good old boy system theme/artificial barrier category indicated a system, but members are not sure how the system works. The inaccessible theme/artificial barrier category was noted because participants are aware of a process, but members are not sure how the process works, thereby creating a barrier.

Axial Coding and Resembling Categories

Existing barriers exist in the form of monetary contributions and political access accompanied by financially supporting the winning candidate. The good old boy system portrays a winner, but the winner is obligated to be a member of the regime in power. Often this system is categorized as union affiliation, station affiliation, or friendships. Inaccessibility is an artificial barrier that suggests there is a pathway, and the pathway produces results without the masses understanding how the pathway works or how to enter the pathway.

The selective coding process indicated a core category around which other categories were integrated. The core category was the institutional presence of artificial barriers. In some capacity, the participants expressed they had been subjected to an artificial barrier in the noncompetitive process, and they classified the barriers as political, part of good old boy system, or inaccessible through organizational norms and values. A theme resulting from the data was the acceptance of artificial barriers and the

implications associated with their existence. The finding was that this is the culture of the client agency. It is systemic and tolerable.

As evidenced by the participants' responses, the practice of nontransparent policies and lacking authenticity in the noncompetitive process is problematic for the employees in the client agency. The theme of all respondents was a noncompetitive promotional system many considered an artificial barrier; however, it was an accepted practice. The first question of the interview asked each participant to explain the selection and recruitment process for noncompetitive promotions. All participants could not explain the selection process or the recruitment process. Each negative answer to the first interview question signified the presence of a barrier to the noncompetitive process. The barrier was the acceptance of policy that supports a lack of transparency. The negative responses indicated a negative experience and a customary experience, and participants had no clear way to identify the process of a noncompetitive promotion. Terms such as "political," "good ole boy system," or "you have to know somebody to get those spots" reflected entry into the noncompetitive system. The recruitment process in the noncompetitive process is arbitrary and classified as dependent on the firefighter's station assignment and individuals the firefighter has worked with during those assignments. Entry into the noncompetitive process is classified by multiple variables including the firefighter's perceived likability, firefighter's willingness and ability to make political contributions to political candidates, and the firefighter being a part of the winning political campaign. The barriers to the noncompetitive positions are removed once the firefighter is assigned and in position, meaning nothing in the process is guaranteed.

The fundamental theme of the selection process of noncompetitive processes within the client agency is artificial barriers through the lack of an official process. There is no transparency for preparing for, competing for, or being assigned a noncompetitive position. The current noncompetitive process is an artificial barrier lacking a pathway and transparency. The problematic side of this analysis is that all parties are aware, and no plans are in place to remedy this problem, supporting the need for this qualitative study. The collective bargaining agent, the administration of the client agency, and the Office of Employee Services within the City of Jacksonville are aware of the absence of transparency and the absence of a clear pathway into the noncompetitive side of promotions within the client agency. All parties are leaving the decision to assign members of the client agency to the concept of management's rights, which could be perceived as supportive of the notion of appointment by preference, not merit.

The recommendations to resolve artificial barriers are to amend the noncompetitive process and make a similar process to the competitive process. The competitive process is transparent, periodically assessed, and written in the client agency's standard operating guidelines and the collective bargaining agreement. Part of the recommendation was to create a pathway with standards of entry that highlight how members of the client agency can enter the noncompetitive process.

Limitations

An unexpected limitation was the client organization members' fear of being retaliated against for participating in the experiment. I understood this limitation. I viewed the process as specific to the individual and a single person sharing their

experience, which equates to a series of actual events. However, some individuals were afraid of sharing their experiences because of fear of reprisal and future ineligibility for noncompetitive positions within the current system. Although the client agency has policies in place to suggest against reprisal, members were still fearful of reprisal.

Implications

As an organization, the implications of this study may offer the client organization an opportunity to remove artificial barriers by providing a transparent selection process for noncompetitive positions. The client organization endeavors to be a world-class agency. These implications could affect the community of fire departments. The steps to remove artificial barriers in the business of civil services can impact all aspects of civil services, including systems and organizations within the city. Social change in the client agency begins with changes in the client agency's culture. The impetus for that change is the removal of barriers. The statements of firefighters and their experiences within a fire department that changed to better the experience of its members by seeking to be a better fire department are world-class and begin with the removal of barriers.

Recommendations

My recommendations are the creation of a development committee for a professional growth and development plan for the noncompetitive positions like the professional growth and development plan for competitive positions and begin the open dialogues for a transparent process. Amending the client organization's culture begins with changing the conversations within the client organization. The concept of a

professional growth and development plan is present in the client agency and used for every competitive position. The professional growth and development plan for noncompetitive positions would explain the precursors for entry into the noncompetitive positions. The recommendation includes a recruitment officer for noncompetitive positions to govern the process. The recruitment officer would ensure that entry into the noncompetitive positions was maintained with a clear pathway, including advertisement. The recruitment officer working with the administration of the client agency, Employee Services personnel, General Counsel, and members of the collective bargaining agent would assist in establishing parameters for a standard operating procedure or guideline and entry of the amended promotional process into the collective bargaining agreement. Evaluation and review methods should be implemented as needed for the first five years and during the review and amendment stage of the collective bargaining agreement, which can occur every three years.

Strength and Limitations

The project's strength is that the client agency's members want to share their experiences and desire a transparent process. The strength was also access to the client agency's personnel. The limitation is the fear of reprisal, which represents a barrier to progress within the agency. The concept of artificial barriers is the presence of a barrier, no matter if the barrier exists or is perceived to be there. The greater the perception of a barrier increases the presence of the barrier.

Section 5: Dissemination Plan

The findings will be disseminated to the client organization through an oral presentation including a policy brief of the results with recommendations. The client organization will provide the recommended team members for the presentation. The dissemination of the results will take place inside the client organization's headquarters. The dissemination of the results will take place on final project approval and based on the availability of the client organization's team. The format of the dissemination will include a review of the project and the results of the study. The client organization will have an opportunity to review the interview questions and the summary of participant responses. The client organization will have an opportunity to ask questions about the project and the administration of the study. During the dissemination process, the following recommendations are topics for discussions with the client organization. The dissemination will include recommendations and topics for discussion with the client organization. The client organization is aware of the sensitive nature of the data collected. When meeting with the client organization, I will discuss the following recommendations and observations:

1. The importance of a formal recruitment process for the noncompetitive positions. An official recruitment process will begin the conversations of transparency in the noncompetitive selection process. Transparency was an important topic for the interview participants.
2. The recommendation for greater transparency is pivotal along discussions of procedures required to initiate and develop an official policy for

noncompetitive positions in the form of a standard operating procedure.

Members of the client agency are accustomed to the use and implementation of standard operating procedures. During the interview process, members advised the lack of a policy is problematic. The establishment of a new policy is only a recommendation. The client organization retains all authority over their policy process.

3. The client's current professional growth and development plan lacks a provision for the noncompetitive positions. Awareness and knowledge of access requirements are additions to the professional growth and development plan to provide entry into the noncompetitive class selection by creating transparent requirements for each position. As discussed by the interview participants, the professional growth and development plan affords members of the client organization the knowledge of the requirements for entry into all competitive positions.
4. Considerations to amend the collective bargaining agreement to include the new proposed professional growth and development plan additions. Many actions of the client organization are governed by the collective bargaining agreement, and an amendment would allow for greater clarity. Greater clarity could benefit all parties involved.

Publishing the results in a national journal related to fire services or civil services would provide for a dissemination scope beyond the client agency and would allow the results to reach a broader audience. Creating a policy brief for local community groups

and stakeholders would offer insight into the experience of the personnel within the client agency and could foster conversations on how to avoid the applications of artificial barriers. The final product would serve as a potential benefit to similar agencies such as fire departments, police departments, or other agencies currently operating using noncompetitive positions by encouraging progressive, proactive departmental policies without the limitations of artificial barriers.

The presence of barriers sends the wrong message throughout the client organization by providing positive affirmations of the client agency's support of artificial barriers within the client agency. This study's findings included an appeal for merit and professional qualifications by creating a process that allows the members of the client agency to reach world-class status by becoming world-class members. Building a better fire department begins with building better firefighters. The crux of the solution is creating efficient, effective, and fair processes, which means the client agency must have a transparent process, or the current process will consistently be questioned for deficiencies in fairness, efficiency, and effectiveness.

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Appendix A: Interview Group Questions

1. Can you explain the selection process, including the recruitment process of noncompetitive positions within the client agency?
2. Explain the role of management and the union in the recruitment process of noncompetitive positions?
3. What roles do artificial barriers play in hindrances to employee professional progress?
4. How has or is the expression of management's responsibility for removing obstacles to promotional opportunities demonstrated?
5. How does the organizational culture incite the presence of barriers?
6. Explain the formal recruitment process for an appointed position?
7. What role does the union play in the selection process?
8. What role does politics play in the selection process?

Appendix B: Client Agreement Letter

1. Client Information	
<i>Name of Client Organization</i> Jacksonville Fire and Rescue Department	<i>Name of Student/Researcher</i> Eric Mitchell
<i>Name of Client Contact Person</i> Deputy Chief of Rescue Jake Blanton	<i>Email of Client Contact Person</i> jblanton@coj.net
<i>Client Contact's Mailing Address</i> 515 N Julia Street Jacksonville, FL. 32202	

2. Project Description
The project will include a research study on the perception of artificial barriers in noncompetitive promotions within the client agency.

3. Tasks to be completed by Researcher
As the researcher, I will complete the study using research and a focus group to produce a deliverable in the form of a SOG to the client.

4. Assistance (including data) to be provided by Client Organization
Access to COJ and JFRD policies. Clearance to conduct virtual focus groups for feedback from department members and assistance in creating the deliverable.

5. Deliverables for the Client Organization
Memo to client agency which suggests a defined process for noncompetitive Special Assignment positions.

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Terms of confidentiality and compliance:

In all reports (including drafts shared with peers and faculty members), the student is required to maintain confidentiality by removing names and key pieces of information that might disclose an Institution's/individual's identity or inappropriately divulge proprietary details. If the client organization wishes to publicize the findings of this project, that is the organization's judgment call.

The student will publish the study in Proquest as a doctoral capstone (with site and participant identifiers withheld). The study is based upon the academic research completed by the student as well as the data provided by the Client Organization and/or collected by the student as outlined in the above agreement. If the data collected include interviews, interview recordings and full transcripts will be shared with any interviewee (upon request), and the student will provide opportunities for clarifying previous statements. Transcripts with identifiers redacted may be shared with the doctoral student's university faculty, peer advisors, and site leadership (upon request).

The student will not use these data for any purpose other than the project outlined in this agreement. The doctoral student is responsible for understanding and complying with all of the Client Organization's policies and regulatory requirements.

The Code of Conduct in the current Walden University Student Handbook and the ethical requirements for IRB compliance will also govern the research completed by the student. Students are required to uphold professional principals in fulfilling their roles as consultants to client organizations. In addition to confidentiality requirements and protections as outlined above, students also will protect the integrity of the Walden University and the Client Organization and exhibit professional conduct at all times.

6. Project Approval & Signature	
<i>Signature of Client Contact Person</i>	<i>Date</i>
<i>Jake Blanton</i>	<i>02/24/21</i>
<i>Name of Client Contact Person</i>	<i>Jake Blanton</i>
<i>Title of Client Contact Person</i>	<i>Deputy Division Chief Rescue</i>