ADDRESSING BURNOUT THROUGH CULTURAL CHANGE:

How Leaders Can Stem Attrition and Support Employees

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The COVID-19 pandemic brought a slew of changes to higher education. Through a rapid pivot to virtual learning and in-person concerns about masks and vaccinations, many of these changes came at great costs to faculty and staff, who reported increased feelings of exhaustion and burnout (McClure and Hicklin Fryar 2022; Malesic 2021; Pettit 2021).

This brief explores the causes of faculty and staff burnout and offers solutions for campus leadership. It provides an overview of burnout and its consequences, including faculty and staff departures. It then discusses the reasons faculty and staff are burned out and offers suggestions for institutional leaders about what to do about it. The most effective solutions rest not at the individual level, but at the organizational level. In short, burnout is often the result of organizational conditions that allow it to thrive. As such, the responsibility to address the conditions that perpetuate this mental health challenge resides with colleges and universities.

WHAT IS BURNOUT?

Burnout was first conceptualized in the 1970s after researchers witnessed exhaustion and withdrawal of engagement in health and human services workers. Since then, burnout has been observed across fields in employees who work with people, from police to educators (Schaufeli, Leiter, and Maslach 2009). Recently, it was recognized by the World Health Organization as a syndrome (Gewin 2021). Best associated with the work of Christina Maslach, burnout comprises three interrelated constructs: emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and feelings of ineffectiveness. Symptoms of burnout at work include feelings of ineffectiveness and dissatisfaction (Maslach and Jackson 1981). Burnout can lead to both individual and organizational consequences, including turnover, low morale, dissatisfaction with the workplace and opportunities for growth, and a belief that work is no longer meaningful. In education specifically, cynicism may lead faculty and staff to see "students as problems rather than people [they]'re meant to help" (Malesic 2021). Many of the organizational consequences pervade higher education today.

Indeed, an October 2020 survey conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and Fidelity Investments suggests that many higher education faculty and staff are experiencing burnout. This survey of over 1,100 faculty members found that more than two-thirds of respondents had felt "extremely" or "very" stressed over the previous month, compared with just one-third of respondents who reported similar feelings in 2019. Over 55 percent reported feeling little to no hope over the previous month, compared with one in four faculty members in 2019 (Tugend 2020). Clearly, the COVID-19 pandemic has led to a variety of stressors for faculty and staff. Further, as campuses adapted to pandemic realities, many institutions asked faculty and staff to perform more professional work and thus exacerbated potential burnout.

THE GREAT RESIGNATION: A CONSEQUENCE OF BURNOUT?

Given that burnout is associated with departure from the workplace (Maslach and Jackson 1981), it is no surprise that higher education is seeing increased turnover. Nearly 60 percent of respondents to a recent College and University Professional Association for Human Resources (CUPA-HR) survey of 3,800 higher education workers in staff roles reported that they were likely to look for employment in the next year. This figure represents a significant increase from respondents to a similar survey in 2021, which found that only 43 percent reported similar feelings (Bichsel et al. 2022). Additionally, respondents (who were not limited to a single option) reported being open to seeking new jobs both inside and outside of higher education; while nearly 70 percent of respondents would choose to look for work at another college or university and 43 percent would be happy to stay at their current institution, half reported that they might seek employment at a nonprofit and nearly two-thirds would be happy to work at a private, for-profit company (Bichsel et al. 2022). These findings suggest that higher education is at risk for losing its talent.

It is not only staff who have noted these challenges. A recent survey of college leadership (presidents, deans, and other leaders) conducted by *The Chronicle of Higher Education* confirmed that colleges and universities are having a hard time filling open positions. Nearly 80 percent of respondents said that their institution had more open positions in 2022 than in 2021, while 84 percent said that they were having a difficult time hiring (Zahneis 2022). Survey respondents said that applicant pools were significantly smaller than in years past, and 77 percent of respondents suggested that "higher education is a less appealing place to work than it was a year ago" (Zahneis 2022). In short, faculty and staff report that they want to leave their positions, while administrators report that they are having difficulty filling empty positions. As De Smet et al. (2022) suggested, the COVID-19 pandemic led people to reevaluate their priorities and what they want from a job and from life. Like many industries, higher education now must respond to detrimental shifts in its workforce.

FACTORS DRIVING BURNOUT

Higher education has been criticized for creating an unhealthy culture that promotes excessive work at the expense of family and personal health. In fact, higher education has adopted what Acker (1990) and Williams (1989) described as ideal worker norms: the expectation that employees are always available to the organization and always working, with no family responsibilities in the home (Sallee 2014, 2021). Indeed, two-thirds of respondents to the CUPA-HR survey of staff noted that they regularly worked more hours than was required of them, while 10 percent reported working 16 or more extra hours per week (Bichsel et al. 2022). Excessive work hours drive higher education staff to leave the profession (Frank 2013; Marshall et al. 2016), with long workdays being one of many factors that lead to employee departure and burnout. Other concerns that are symptomatic of burnout and noted by employees included dissatisfaction with salary and opportunities for advancement, a preference for remote work or flexible schedules, technology overload, lack of meaningful work, and extra work that comes from unfilled positions. The list is long, but the good news is that the majority of these concerns can be addressed by institutional leaders.

Salary Concerns

Higher education used to be considered a safe employer that provided a strong salary with exceptional benefits. Today, however, many employees report dissatisfaction with their pay and are looking for different jobs both inside and outside of higher education: 76 percent of respondents to the CUPA-HR survey noted that they would seek new opportunities because of a desire for a salary increase. Past research of higher education staff members found that many consider leaving the profession—and do leave—because of dissatisfaction with pay (Johnsrud and Rosser 1999; Marshall et al. 2016; Sallee 2019). In a current study of student affairs professionals, many reported that their colleagues are taking jobs in private industry that offer three times the salary of higher education.[1] Many in higher education take broader issue with entry-level positions that require a master's degree and may come with little more than a $40,000 annual salary. Similar concerns extend to faculty compensation. Many faculty could be better compensated—and have a better work-life balance—by transitioning to employment in their related industry or other sectors. Further, it is worth noting that salaries at most institutions have not kept pace with recent inflation. Even faculty and staff who work at campuses that regularly give 2 to 3 percent cost-of-living adjustments still find that they are effectively earning less money this year than they did last year. In a multitude of ways, salary concerns can drive employees' sense of burnout and dissatisfaction with their institution.

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Be forthright in advertising the salary ranges for positions.** Too many job ads simply state that pay is commensurate with experience. Institutions should be forthcoming about their rate of pay so that candidates have complete information about a position before deciding whether to apply.
- **Offer competitive pay.** Given that research suggests people are leaving higher education due to dissatisfaction with salary, institutions need to provide competitive salaries to attract and retain talent. This may require that institutions conduct a market analysis or competitive salary analysis based on geographic area or peer institutions.
- **Adjust for cost of living.** Too many employees do not get cost-of-living adjustments; of those that do, the adjustments are typically between 1 and 2 percent. Responding to inflation is critical to keeping employees.
- **Explore and promote all benefits.** Compensation goes beyond salary, and colleges and universities have a variety of tools at their disposal to support faculty and staff. Free tuition for employees and their dependents, no-cost access to campus fitness facilities, or even extending meal plans or other food benefits to staff are all potential incentives. Campuses might even offer employee housing or mortgage assistance programs, onsite childcare, or counseling services. Campuses should consider offering an array of incentives that appeal to employees at all stages of their careers, from those in their early twenties to those nearing retirement.

1 This study, Working Parents in Student Affairs, is an ongoing research project by Margaret W. Sallee and Saralyn McKinnon-Crowley.

Opportunities for Advancement

Many faculty find themselves in adjunct or fixed-term roles as they try to secure a tenure-track job. Given that tenure-line positions now account for just one-third of all faculty positions (NCES 2021a, 2021b), competition is fierce. Moreover, adjuncts and those in fixed-term appointments frequently report not receiving the same types of support as their tenure-line counterparts. Similarly, many staff report dissatisfaction with clear opportunities for advancement (Bichsel et al. 2022; Jo 2008; Marshall et al. 2016). In one study, nearly one-third of higher education administrators noted that they left campus because of a lack of immediate opportunities for advancement (Jo 2008). Respondents to CUPA-HR's recent survey echoed similar experiences, as 30 percent noted that they were seeking other jobs out of a desire for promotion or more responsibility (Bichsel et al. 2022). Higher education staff roles are, by nature, bottom-heavy: the field requires more people in entry-level service roles with fewer mid- and senior-level positions. Although some institutions provide job coaching to help prepare employees for the next step, many employers leave identifying pathways forward to the individual. Leaving the onus on the individual sends the message that the organization only cares about the employee as a worker for a particular role, rather than on capitalizing on their strengths throughout their lifespan.

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Identify career paths.** Share with employees the skills and competencies that are needed to advance in a given career path (for example, entry-level coordinator → assistant director → associate director → director). Provide the training and support for employees to acquire the skills to be prepared to assume a new position.
- **Reclassify positions to create a less bottom-heavy organization.** Doing so will compensate employees for their work and provide them with an identifiable career path at the institution, instead of having to look elsewhere for advancement.
- **Provide career coaches and counselors.** The human resources office can help staff understand how to build a career on campus.

Preference for Remote Work and Flexible Schedules

For many faculty and staff, the pandemic brought an almost immediate pivot to working and teaching remotely. Faculty struggled to transition their seated courses into virtual ones; many staff figured out how to deliver services remotely, while others, like those in residence halls, continued to deliver in-person services throughout the first part of the pandemic. Despite the challenges, many faculty and staff have reported a desire to retain the option to work remotely. Forty-three percent of respondents to the CUPA-HR survey suggested that the opportunity to work remotely would be a factor in their job decisions (Bichsel et al. 2022). These trends mirror those of workers in industries nationwide; 58 percent of respondents to one survey of 25,000 Americans in the workforce responded that they are able to work at home at least part time, while 35 percent can work at home full time (Dua et al. 2022). These findings stand in marked contrast to many higher education institutions that have seen a significant push to return to business as usual. Many higher education offices maintained the notion that employees need to be in the office from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. with an hour for lunch (or a similarly structured schedule). However, allowing staff to shape their work hours—either by working remotely or by flexing their schedules during a standard workday—would lead to greater satisfaction with the workplace. Denying partially and fully remote opportunities will only increase feelings of burnout and drive people to leave.

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Create hybrid schedules to allow interested staff to work both in-person and remotely.** If offices are concerned about having an in-person presence five days per week, arrange schedules so that at least one employee is on campus at all times, with other employees available for student meetings via Zoom. (Anecdotally, student affairs professionals are seeing a preference from students for meeting on Zoom, rather than in person.)
- **Have flexible schedules that work for each office.** Some units ask that all staff are in the office the same day each week to allow for full-team meetings, and staff then rotate other days in and out of the office. Unit leaders might also consider letting employees use flexible work schedules, perhaps performing their work on a shifted schedule, such as from 11:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. or taking a long lunch in the middle of the day. Often these accommodations help employees attend to responsibilities in their personal lives, thus creating more balance. These shifted hours can also benefit offices that want to be open for longer hours.
- **Offer faculty the option to teach remotely, as appropriate.** Although many campuses have returned to in-person instruction, many faculty and students are interested in online instruction for reduced work-life conflict. Additionally, the rise of Zoom and a variety of technological tools allows for great engagement through synchronous courses that asynchronous courses did not.

Technology Overload

The past decades have brought a glut of technological tools to assist with work; technology allows people to accomplish work in new ways, but also encroaches into people's work and lives. In informal conversations with colleagues and in data collected for ongoing research projects, many staff members shared that upon pivoting to remote work at the start of the pandemic, they were expected to always be accessible to answer questions on chat programs such as Slack, Microsoft Teams, and other chat services. However, as Cal Newport (2016) argued, asking staff and faculty to be constantly available via chat or email negates their ability to get any meaningful work done. He suggests that deep thinking is made impossible by people checking email or chat once every six minutes (Ellis 2021). In short, faculty and staff are asked to perform their identities as committed workers, even if it interferes with their ability to actually get work done (Warzel and Petersen 2021).

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Reduce the use of chat programs in the office.** Many offices have their teams constantly connected through chat programs, and being constantly available comes at a price to productivity and deep-thinking.
- **Simply rely on email.** Email can be less disruptive, particularly if employees occasionally close their email programs to work on projects that require focused attention.

Lack of Meaningful Work

Many people choose work at colleges and universities because they are inspired by the mission and values of higher education. Ongoing research suggests that people are drawn to jobs in higher education because of a commitment to higher education as an enterprise. For example, Sallee and McKinnon-Crowley's ongoing study of student affairs professionals suggests that while many are burned out and considering leaving the field, they remain because of their commitment to working with students and promoting student development. Similarly, 77 percent of respondents to CUPA-HR's survey of staff stated they believe that their work has purpose (Bichsel et al. 2022). Studies of faculty and PhD holders indicate that many pursue academic careers because they are drawn to careers in research and teaching. However, faculty and staff are growing disenchanted with higher education as an enterprise. Colleges and universities cannot continue to rely on higher education's mission as a draw for employees; however, they can utilize it as one part of a portfolio, along with other benefits to retain employees.

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Build jobs around the strengths of an employee.** Although every position announcement contains a list of responsibilities, each person who steps into a job will bring different strengths and interests. While fulfilling the basic responsibilities of the job is critical, employees are more likely to thrive when they work on projects that are of interest to them.
- **Take a page from the playbook of tech companies.** Some innovation-based companies allow employees to devote one day per week to working on a project that is of interest to the employee, but that is not directly related to their work portfolio.

Increasing Workload—and Unfilled Positions

Even before the pandemic, many colleges and universities were not always able to fill positions due to budget shortages. The pandemic only exacerbated these challenges. Some institutions responded to the financial challenges from the pandemic with layoffs, furloughs, and early retirement offers and by not filling vacancies created due to other staff departures. These empty positions have created challenges for those who remain. Nearly two-thirds of staff respondents to one survey indicated that they have absorbed additional responsibilities from those who left their positions, while 73 percent stated that they have taken on more responsibilities created because of the pandemic (Bichsel et al. 2022). Moreover, higher education is now facing an additional challenge; even when institutions can post a position, they are receiving far fewer applicants (Zahneis 2022). This inability to fill positions continues to put extra work on the shoulders of remaining staff. Such difficulty is both a cause and indicator of employee burnout.

WHAT CAMPUS LEADERS CAN DO:

- **Limit communication during non-working hours.** As highlighted earlier, two-thirds of respondents to one survey are regularly working hours beyond the standard workday (Bichsel et al. 2022). Some of this work comes in the form of after-hours email. If such work is truly necessary, leaders should rethink sending emails outside the regular workday and instead use the delay-send feature in many email programs to encourage staff to respond during regular work hours. Leaders and supervisors can role model taking time away from work by not contacting their staff outside of standard work hours.
- **Explore a four-day workweek.** Organizations are recognizing that employees can be equally (or more) productive by working fewer hours a week. In fact, a survey of Japanese workers that implemented a similar policy found a 40 percent increase in productivity. Such initiatives must be implemented with care, however, as some studies suggest that workers feel stressed by trying to fit in the same amount of work into fewer hours in the week (Russell, Murphy, and Terry 2022), while others feel rejuvenated and that they have greater work-life balance (Coulthard Barnes et al. 2019). Many companies and institutions that adopt a four-day workweek continue paying their staff their same salary while having them work fewer hours in the week.
- **Rethink meetings.** Employees spend a lot of their time in meetings, so much so that sometimes there is little time to get work done. Some institutions have designated meeting-free days to give employees time for longer stretches of focused work. Other campuses have created a policy that meetings are scheduled for 25 or 50 minutes to allow time for employees to stretch their legs or attend to other personal needs. Consider whether holding a meeting is necessary and whether all attendees need to be present; meetings should be saved for idea generation, not information sharing (Dubner 2019). Employees' time is valuable, and spending unnecessary time in meetings only increases their workload.

ADDRESSING BURNOUT: RADICAL CULTURAL SHIFT

Addressing burnout and low morale requires committed effort on the part of institutions. These suggestions look to change how colleges and universities operate and treat their faculty and staff by creating workplaces that are humane and that support employees' personal and professional lives. This effort comes through rethinking where and how work can be performed, and it must be done by leadership.

Direct supervisors and institutional leaders play pivotal roles in shaping faculty and staff's response to working conditions. Half of the respondents to one survey left a position because of a lack of support from immediate supervisors (Jo 2008). While supervisors shape day-to-day experiences, presidents and provosts set the direction for the institution (Black 2015). These senior leaders shape policy decisions, from whether remote work is allowable to how frequently staff is promoted from within. In these areas, failing to read shifts in employee attitudes and not supporting employees may lead to greater burnout and turnover. Informal conversations with faculty and staff suggest that they feel most supported when their institutional leaders and direct supervisors communicate feelings of trust in and care for their employees. This means valuing employees' personal and professional lives—and trusting in employees' competence to perform their jobs.

Working in higher education used to be highly sought out. Let's change the culture so that it has that reputation once again.

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