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The effects of endless change on
higher education's workforce

Key takeaways:

- The long tail of the pandemic has combined with existing uncertainty in higher education to cause alarming levels of enduring stress and burnout.

- Faculty and staff alike are reporting increased levels of anger, fatigue, and stress and decreased levels of hope.

- Higher education leadership must lean into the labor churn that these conditions have created and engineer new strategies and solutions to navigate the resulting Great Realignment, reimagining how their institutions can serve students while prioritizing the needs of their faculty and staff.

Introduction

These past two years of crisis have revealed institutions' capacity for rapid adjustment as well as highlighted challenges that higher education has long struggled to resolve.

Enrollment crises, budget reductions, layoffs, and changing scope of staff roles have defined the past decade of change that the pandemic accelerated. This enduring state of change has produced an overwhelming level of stress – and burnout is a top concern throughout the sector. It is vital for higher education leadership to consider how this constant transformation will continue to sap their institutions' staying power and construct plans to support their faculty and staff from this point forward.

Well-being during times of uncertainty

The pandemic-induced shifts to remote learning and working, residence facility shutdown, and overall organizational disruption kicked off a prolonged period of uncertainty that persists today.

Relentless uncertainty-related stress can have disastrous effects on mental health and morale[1]. Wellness among college communities, a deepening source of concern for the past decade, is now an issue that requires immediate attention. 87% of faculty have agreed or strongly agreed the pandemic added difficulty and stress to their jobs[2]: New modes of teaching (and balancing those new approaches with existing duties around advising, research, and pursuing tenure) and lack of institutional support emerged as top stressors. Further, faculty and staff navigating their own mental health challenges may be less equipped to provide the front-line support their students need. These challenges can compel them to choose between investing in solutions for students and providing for

their own wellness. All these factors have contributed to serious increases in burnout and frustration that are starting to characterize the experience of working in higher education. This perpetuates a preexisting trend among faculty and staff defined by rising stress and declining hope for better conditions in the future[3].

Careers beyond the COVID burnout

Colleges and universities have historically been secure places for staff and faculty to build stable careers. Though compensation has not always been exceptional, generous fringe benefits and manageable workloads in mission-aligned environments bred employee loyalty. Higher education leaders may have assumed for too long that their workforce is willing to do whatever it takes to fulfill the institutional mission; people's appetite for weathering the above challenges "for the students" is waning: More than half of the people who work in higher education are making plans to leave their jobs, with half considering non-profit opportunities and two-thirds looking at private industry – both well outside the sector of higher education altogether. The prolonged state of emergency in higher education – and the sector's increasingly apparent inability to nurture its human capital – is causing a talent drain from which recovery will be challenging, and which will contribute to lasting issues as institutions struggle to innovate in more sustainable and future-facing ways.

Labor shortages and consequences of the failure to backfill

Higher education institutions eliminated more than 400,000 jobs in 2020. Though all but 40,000 have been reinstated, institutions are having trouble filling those positions[4]. The downstream effects of positions being open too long are intuitive and clear: The same amount of work remains with fewer people to do it. While the long-term trend is that higher education has added more administrative positions, those increases rest in the middle to upper-level management roles, while direct service staffing remains spread thin. Effort has been redistributed among the remaining staff, whose compensation has generally not changed and who do not have the capacity to absorb extra responsibilities.

Of people resigning from Student Affairs positions:

90%

90% cite poor compensation

81%

81% report feeling unappreciated by their employers

The effects of chronic understaffing and the pandemic-induced labor shortage are depleting candidate pools in many disciplines[5]. Shortages in food service and maintenance ranks are well-documented, and financial aid offices also face dire circumstances[6] as they shed workers when substantial federal compliance standards are on the horizon. A growing accumulation of evidence shows similar unrest in student affairs. Nearly 90% of respondents cite poor compensation as the reason for resigning and 81% cite feeling underappreciated by their employer[7]. Further, decades-long efforts to trim budgets[8] and create a nimbler teaching force through adjunct and contingent arrangements are backfiring as now those part-time faculty are less interested in filling those roles[9]. 55% of faculty, nearly half of whom were tenured, strongly considered career changes or early retirement due to the strains of the pandemic[10].

How leadership can meet the needs of the moment

Leaders must resist the urge to gravitate back toward the normal they knew and listen to their institutional community to imagine a different path. The current higher education workforce is empowered; people can change jobs and industries with historic ease, and many are doing so[11]. Staff and faculty alike have long requested seats at the table and want to feel a sense of ownership and empowerment in how they do their work. They seek matrixed organizations, reduced hierarchy, and empowerment of the front lines to make decisions within frameworks established by leadership. Many teams can operate remotely across units, focusing less on time in the office and more on outcomes of their work. Higher education leaders may seem apprehensive about how they might lead such a distributed workforce, but as many other elements of our work life have changed, so should leadership strategies evolve to include support, growth, professional development, empowerment, motivation, conflict management, communication, coaching, and mentoring.

Give employees a place at the table

The rapid move to remote work revealed what could be done from home and what flexible arrangements are possible for various functions. Administrators should continue reevaluating opportunities to support flexible work arrangements and reinforce productivity expectations without demanding full time in-person engagement as the de facto operating model of the institution. The most productive way to identify and implement new strategies is to create opportunities for dialogue with faculty and staff, and be transparent about the rationale when desired changes aren't implemented.

Make quick wins happen

Mission-driven loyalty still drives many faculty and staff. Even in this pressurized environment, institutions can nurture that loyalty with a realignment of personnel, a fresh look at antiquated processes, adoption of technology aids, and better use of student data to focus educational efforts more efficiently. Schools of modest means can make meaningful efforts to demonstrate how they value their people. As an example, one institution—with enrollment of around 1500 and an endowment of $49 million—is implementing a 32-hour work week[12] for most staff. Other institutions may try more subtle shifts, but investment in human resources will clearly be part of the solution. New talent is getting progressively more difficult to source, so retaining the people already committed to the cause is critical.

Center on employee wellness by adjusting demands and support

To heal this fatigue and retain their talent, leaders should take a critical look at the demands they place on their faculty and staff and recognize the effects of permanent role and responsibility expansion. Going forward, employee mental health and well-being merits separate consideration and robust support. Increased mental health resources, childcare options, and modified benefits and plans for crisis management are some key options for future consideration.

Hybrid and remote work models, wherever possible and desired, should be offered proactively and thoughtfully integrated into standard organizational approaches[13]. It is now firmly established that these arrangements, for those who desire them, go a long way toward mitigating the stress of the higher education workplace.

Increased stability in staffing, limitations on roles and responsibilities, and the prioritization of wellness among higher education employees will help to build capacity to deal with the pressures that the higher education workforce currently faces. Monitoring and managing signs of mental health distress will remain a key practice for higher education leaders and HR departments.

Closing

Leaders have an opportunity to embrace a new era in higher education and employ effective strategies to support their workforce as the industry evolves into its "next normal." Organizational leadership based on empowerment and ownership can counteract stress and can contribute to institutional agility and innovation while retaining talent.

Regardless of the approach, administrators must expand their awareness and empathy toward the considerable stress their workforce is experiencing. They should be cognizant of the duties assigned and inherited as the labor force shrinks or reorganizes and be intentional in how work is done, where it is done, and by whom. Failure to create optimal structures and systems for employees is likely to result in further erosion of morale and loss of talent. Leaders can leverage dialogue and implement meaningful support structures to resolve tension and balance capacity limits within their operating models resulting in a Great Realignment that is not only centered on students but is supportive of the faculty and staff that must serve those students in a sustainable way.

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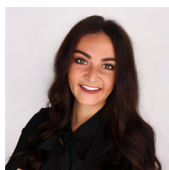
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