

Supporting Faculty Morale



- Acknowledge and fix the structural problems
- Send supportive messages
- Set limits on communication and meetings
- Empower department heads

Have American colleges forgotten about the morale of professors — the front-line workers in higher education? On many campuses, that seems to be the sentiment.

Margaret W. Sallee, a professor of higher education at the University at Buffalo, was the author of a 2022 report, “Addressing Burnout Through Cultural Change: How Leaders Can Stem Attrition and Support Employees.”

Her update? “I’m not seeing a lot of real progress, to be totally honest,” she says.

Tenure-track faculty seem particularly at risk of burnout. Lots of people would like to forget the Covid years, but for tenure-track faculty, those years left a long tail of trouble: lost chances to get to know colleagues and delays in research. Faculty members who are parents still struggle with children who fell behind academically.

Colleges that didn’t support faculty members in the transition to online classes or pressured them to work face to face before it was safe now must deal with broken trust, says Kevin Gannon, director of the Center for the

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If many administrators have forgotten about faculty morale, the faculty have not. In a recent *Chronicle of Higher Education* survey, faculty members who were on the tenure track or were tenured were asked: “In terms of defining success for your institution over the next 5-10 years what are the top goals?” The largest portion of those surveyed — 62 percent — said “reducing burnout and improving morale.”

Because of the harsh realities at many colleges, such as slimmer state funding and dwindling enrollments, colleges often rely on faculty to bring in external grants. While some institutions pay brief tribute to faculty morale with daylong wellness workshops, institutions that seek out structural remedies are rare.

“I don’t need to know how to do chair yoga,” says Sallee. “I need to have the people and the infrastructure to support me.”

“Institutions have to pick,” she adds. “Faculty can’t do everything well. What do you want your faculty to focus on?”

Gannon says that at small tuition-dependent institutions, administrators often present campus issues as existential crises. If too many students drop out, the college will close. If professors can’t blend online and in-person instruction, the college will close. Faculty members grow weary, says Gannon, of the “we’re going to die” framing of every issue.

Whether or not wide swaths of the faculty fit a clinical definition of “burned out,” says Gannon, many could be diagnosed as in “pre-burnout,” just as those with elevated blood sugar are diagnosed as pre-diabetic. “Most of our faculty are in pre-burnout,” he says. “Given the way things are going, if more significant care measures are not taken, everybody’s going to tip over that edge.”

Here are some suggestions that administrators and higher-education researchers have for improving morale and easing burnout.

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Acknowledge and fix the structural problems.

The topic of faculty morale sparks passionate responses from education researchers. “The problem isn’t that faculty members feel overburdened,” says Adrianna Kezar, director of the [Pullias Center for Higher Education](#) at the University of Southern California. “The problem is that they *are* overburdened.”

“The reason the tenure-track faculty are so stressed out is because everybody’s just hiring adjuncts,” she adds. “They don’t do the service and don’t do the leadership and don’t do curriculum development. So, every tenure-track faculty member is overwhelmed with work and is also told, ‘Oh, because you get this special job, you now have to publish four times as much as a tenure-track faculty member did in 1970.’”

“The expectations,” she concludes, “have gone way up.”

She recommends that administrators use trusted, respected members of their own faculty — instead of bringing in outside consultants — to build support networks.

Gannon encourages administrators to outline budget problems to the faculty, explain the hard choices they face, and invite suggestions. Faculty members will respond positively, he thinks, by understanding the reality of tight budgets and feeling they have been brought into the conversation.

Along with hiring more full-time faculty, when possible, higher-education researchers say faculty members need

the right personnel support, such as grant writers and staff members who can assist with online teaching and technology use. For parents, affordable on-campus childcare and summer camps are useful, says Sallee.

Winning tenure is the most stressful aspect of a tenure-track faculty member's life. Administrators should outline tenure expectations in as much detail as possible to reduce the stress, researchers say. Specific policies in faculty handbooks alone are not enough. An academic administrator should review the policies in person with new junior faculty members, says Gannon, outlining what people and resources are available to help them.

Administrators can also provide examples of successful tenure portfolios, he and others say. "You've demystified the process in a way that I think is very helpful and healthy," says Gannon.

Mentoring programs are important, says Julie E. Wollman, a two-time college president and professor of practice and associate dean at the University of Pennsylvania. But, she says, they tend to be loosely structured and not sufficiently effective. Mentors should be carefully selected to be a good fit for the person they will advise, she suggests, be held accountable, and be qualified to offer comments on drafts of their mentee's publications and grant proposals.

Policies to extend the tenure clock for extenuating professional or personal circumstances are popular, at least on paper. But Wollman says it's more important to ask, "What kind of support can we give this person so they can stay on track?"

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Send supportive messages.

In early August at the University of Wisconsin at Platteville, the new provost, Laura K. Reynolds, was 12 weeks into her job and working on a largely empty campus. But she had already gone out to visit a crime-scene house used by forensics faculty, a college barn, and the Dairy Innovation Hub, which collaborates with three Wisconsin campuses on dairy research and development. "You have to demonstrate care for people," she says, "and you have to find out what they're interested in. I'm not going to do it via email and newsletter, because we're all choking on email."

She plans "pop up" provost office hours at various locations around campus and, she says, "I bake a lot." She already delivered lemon-blueberry bread to the university's Pioneer Farm, a 430-acre working farm.

At the University of Pennsylvania, Wollman, who teaches a class on leading change in higher education, says leaders need to ask: "Are we listening? Are we learning? Are we open to making changes?"

"Faculty are smart people," says Wollman, "A lot of them are studying the kind of stuff we're trying to do, but we don't always listen to them, which is foolish."

Wollman says as an administrator she makes a point of building relationships with faculty members, knowing about their work, and going to their research presentations.

Reynolds hopes to find out from her Wisconsin faculty what sort of professional development they want — assistance with the learning-management system, help gamifying a course, or tips on managing student behavior. She and her colleagues also want to learn about faculty challenges.

"We feel it's okay to have a problem and to ask for help," she says. "We are building that supportive environment."

Set limits on communication and meetings.

Academics can over-glorify long hours, some researchers say, a habit that needs to be broken. “As academics, so much of our identities are tied up in what we do,” says Sallee, “but it shouldn’t be all that we do or we are.” That means, she says, creating space at work to talk about family and lives outside of work.

Faculty members also cope with a high volume of emails and texts.

Many colleges are encouraging professors to set limits with students on how they will communicate with them. Syllabi can say professors will respond to email on business days within 24 hours. Administrators can make it clear that faculty don’t have to give students their cell-phone numbers.

Administrators can model limit-setting by not sending weekend email. Sallee remembers being a new assistant professor and getting a Saturday night email from a senior faculty member, which was followed by a round of responses from other colleagues. She joined in. “When you’re junior, you feel like you need to engage back,” she says.

Administrators shouldn’t try to slip past limits on emails, says Wollman, with subject lines or first sentences that say, “Don’t read this until Monday” or “I know you’re on vacation, don’t read this until you’re back.” Instead, administrators can use the scheduling feature of their email software to send email at appropriate times.

Meetings are another communication format that can kill morale. To make sure everyone’s time is being used wisely, many administrators say that it’s important to conduct a thorough institutional review of

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all committees and all meetings to make sure each one is necessary, and that each attendee is needed for the meeting’s full duration. The cost “to the institution of people sitting there and not being productive is so great,” says Reynolds, at Wisconsin.

Empower department heads.

Conversations about improving faculty morale often swing around to the topic of department heads. They can be the only administrator that many faculty members — especially junior faculty — have contact with. Department chairs often have a heavy workload but little power. It is often said to be the worst job in academe.

But department chairs do have the power, many administrators believe, to create a supportive environment.

“The more that institutions can invest in a council where all their department chairs meet once a month or couple of times a semester to learn and share best practices, the better,” says Kezar, at Southern California. “They’re the most pivotal person for faculty members.”

From department heads to presidents, administrators agree that improving faculty morale will be a gradual process at most institutions.

“I don’t think there’s any silver bullet that’s going to solve the problem,” says Wollman. “It’s a lot of little things that are really attentive to people’s needs.”

*“Supporting Faculty Morale” was produced by Chronicle Intelligence.
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