

## **A Mixed Method Analysis of Burnout and Turnover Intentions Among Higher Education Professionals During COVID-19**

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### **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly and dramatically altered higher education including changes to the workplace. Many staff and faculty positions were eliminated while other employees experienced furloughs or reduced work hours. Our study examines the experiences of 1,080 higher education professionals serving in various functional roles during the COVID-19 pandemic from 830 institutions of higher education in the United States. We utilized an explanatory sequential mixed methods research design to examine quantitative and qualitative survey data from October 2020 to understand how jobs in higher education changed during the pandemic and how these changes were associated with an individual's burnout and intention to leave higher education. Using multiple regression and thematic analysis and the job-demands and resources framework, we find that higher education professionals who experienced significant disruption in their work had increased odds of experiencing burnout. We also find that eliminating staff positions and significant levels of burnout were associated with increased intentions to leave their current profession in higher education. In open ended responses, higher education professionals described how increased job demands through decreased staff and increased workloads were not accompanied with increased resources, leading to burnout. These working conditions negatively affected participants' personal lives, including their physical and mental health. We conclude with recommendations for research on working conditions in higher education in the pandemic-era and emphasize that institutional leaders should seek systemic changes to support employees.

*Keywords: burnout, turnover, higher education, job demands and resources, explanatory sequential mixed methods design, ordinal regression, logistic regression, thematic analysis*

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“We have broken the backs of the staff who were the last line of defense.” - Higher Education Professional, October 2020

The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly and dramatically altered higher education. In early 2020, most higher education institutions transitioned to remote teaching and many employees worked remotely (Turk et al., 2020). Institutions eliminated staff and faculty, implemented furloughs, or reduced work hours (Bauman, 2021; Chronicle of Higher Education, 2020). Researchers have studied the impact of these conditions on teaching and learning (e.g., Mellieon & Robinson, 2021; Rapanta et al., 2020), and college students' experiences and well-being (e.g., Marinoni et al., 2020; Molock & Parchem, 2021; Son et al., 2020). The few studies that have examined the effects of COVID-19 on the experiences of higher education professionals (HEPs) have relied on data from one institution (e.g., Kaleba, 2020; Regehr & Goel, 2020). Functional areas of higher education such as admissions, student affairs, and registrar's offices have historically experienced high rates of employee turnover (Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018), and during the pandemic have been at higher risk of job loss (Bauman, 2021; McGraw et al., 2020). Turnover rates often exceed 50% percent for HEPs (Marshall et al., 2016) and turnover is costly for organizations (O'Connell & Kung, 2007). Thus, it is important to understand the experiences of people in administrative roles across numerous institutions and how COVID-19 may change their working conditions.

In October 2020, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) disseminated a survey (Kilgore, 2020) to HEPs to understand how higher education jobs changed during the pandemic and how these changes were associated with an individual's burnout and intention to leave higher education. We analyzed these data using an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). First, we

conducted multiple regression analyses to estimate the effects of various job demands and resources (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) on burnout and turnover intention, controlling for institutional characteristics and COVID-19 cases. We find that HEPs who experienced significant disruption in their work had increased odds of experiencing burnout. We also find that eliminating staff positions and significant levels of burnout were associated with increased turnover intentions. Those findings guided our qualitative, thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003). Respondents described how burnout stemmed from decreased staff and increased workloads. These working conditions negatively affected participants' personal lives including their physical and mental health and difficulty raising children. Recognizing that addressing burnout requires systemic changes (Peterson, 2020) and that self-care rhetoric cannot address the concerns of HEPs (Squire & Nicolazzo, 2019), we argue that institutional leaders should change policies to address long-standing concerns about working conditions to stem a potential exodus of HEPs (Ellis, 2021; McClure, 2020).

### **Literature Review**

Burnout has been studied in a variety of contexts (e.g., Maslach, 2003; Peterson, 2020; Schaufeli et al., 2009) and has been associated with decreased job satisfaction among HEPs (Brewer & Clippard, 2002). The higher education work environment has many characteristics that can exacerbate employee burnout causing emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and a diminished sense of personal accomplishment (Maslach, 2003). HEPs can face extreme work obligations that cause or contribute to burnout (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018). These obligations require HEPs in some functional areas to be available beyond typical business hours, including evenings and weekends, to support students (Wilk, 2016). HEPs who provide student services including counseling often have increased levels of burnout (Maslach,

2003; Mullen, Blount, et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2021). Anderson (2021) highlights how HEPs with responsibility for promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion experience burnout because of institutional practices that ‘burn through’ these workers, in part because of increased responsibilities and declining resources. These high levels of burnout and stress among HEPs have also been associated with increased turnover intentions (Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018).

Budget cuts in higher education have negative effects on working conditions. Persistent years of cost-cutting can make lower-level staff feel disillusioned and less willing to find cost saving measures within departments (Romano et al., 2010). Workforce reductions and furloughs can correspond with increased expectations of individuals at multiple levels of an institution’s organizational hierarchy, increasing job-related stress (Pelletier et al., 2015; Romano et al., 2010; Szekeres, 2006). When budget cuts decrease staffing levels, layoff survivors can become disengaged (Li & Guthrie, 2015). The threat of budget shortfalls and budget cuts during the pandemic may have impacted HEPs’ burnout.

Workplace conditions can have a pervasive impact on individual’s personal lives. Recent surveys of HEPs have found that the quality of one’s work-life is associated with well-being and quality of life, especially for those who may experience compassion fatigue from serving students (Chessman, 2021; Mudrak et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2021). Children of student affairs professionals have been shown to internalize ‘bad days’ their parents have at work, indicating that harm stemming from working conditions may extend beyond HEPs themselves (Lehman & Krebs, 2018). This research suggests that what happens in the workplace does not remain isolated but extends into other facets of an individual’s life.

The higher education working environment can be stressful for employees, especially in times of instability. We advance research on higher education working conditions by examining

how the changes in working conditions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic are associated with burnout and turnover intentions. While previous literature has connected burnout to turnover intentions in higher education (Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018), we consider additional aspects of the working environment while analyzing data across various functional areas, organizational hierarchies, and institutions.

### **Theoretical Framework**

We utilized the job demands-resources (JD-R) model of burnout (Demerouti et al., 2001; Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) as a theoretical framework. Burnout is the result of chronic workplace stress characterized by exhaustion, negative feelings towards one's job, and lack of accomplishment (World Health Organization, 2021). While burnout was originally identified in human services professions, the construct has expanded to include any workplace domain (Schaufeli et al., 2009).

The JD-R framework posits that burnout occurs when job demands are high and job resources are low (Demerouti et al., 2001). Job demands are aspects of jobs that require "sustained physical and/or psychological" effort or skills such as high pressure or irregular work hours (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011, p. 2). Job resources represent aspects of jobs that assist in achieving goals and reduce job demands (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). As such, the JD-R framework explicitly considers how an individual is situated within the larger work environment.

We extend the JD-R framework by interrogating how burnout is related to one's intention to leave higher education. Burnout among HEPs has been associated with lower job satisfaction (Brewer & Clippard, 2002), lower health quality of life measures (Mudrak et al., 2018; Preston et al., 2021), and increased turnover intentions among student affairs professionals (Mullen,

Malone, et al., 2018). We utilize the JD-R framework to examine the following research questions:

1. Are job demands and resources statistically significant predictors of HEPs' burnout and turnover intentions when accounting for institutional characteristics and the number of institutionally reported COVID-19 cases?
2. How do HEPs describe experiences of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic?

### **Methods**

We utilized a mixed-methods explanatory sequential design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018) to examine and describe how job demands and resources are associated with HEPs' reported burnout and turnover intentions, and how HEPs described experiences of burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Data Collection and Sample**

In October 2020, AACRAO disseminated a survey (Kilgore, 2020) to members on the impact of COVID-19 on employee working conditions, changes in workplace responsibilities, and stressors related to the pandemic. Survey respondents included 1,411 AACRAO members from 15 countries. We examined responses from HEPs employed in the United States as the pandemic's severity and policy responses vary by country (Marinoni et al., 2020), narrowing our analytic sample to 1,326 respondents. We eliminated 108 respondents who selected more response options than indicated in the survey instructions because this suggested these individuals were not paying close attention to these instructions (Alvarez et al., 2019). This narrowed our analytic sample to 1,218 respondents. Finally, 138 responses were eliminated using listwise deletion for missing quantitative data. The final sample for our analysis was 1,080

respondents from 782 institutions. Of these respondents, 801 (73%) provided qualitative responses to at least one open-ended survey question. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics of the survey respondents.

We collected data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for the 2019 reporting year (U.S. Department of Education, 2019) for our institutional-level variables and COVID-19 cases on November 5, 2020 from the *New York Times* database (New York Times, 2021). Of the 1,080 respondents, 830 of their institutions were included in the *New York Times* database, reducing our sample for analyses that include COVID-19 cases ( $M = 399.3$ ,  $Mdn = 98$ ,  $SD = 764.3$ ). Table 2 includes descriptive statistics of institutional characteristics.

## **Variables**

Our study includes several variables that reflect various job demands and resources that are theoretically associated with burnout and turnover intention. Our predictor variables include organizational proximity to the chief executive (president or chancellor), front-line student service, transition of functions and services, and staffing level changes. Organizational proximity to the chief executive was measured as a categorical variable that reflected the positions between the respondent and the chief executive within the organizational hierarchy. Front-line student service was measured as a dichotomous variable that reflected whether respondents work directly with students. If an individual did not respond to this question, it was assumed they are not responsible for front-line student service. Transition of functions and services was a categorical variable that reflected the transition of work to a remote setting. These variables represent job demands in the JD-R framework as they reflect aspects of jobs that require sustained effort and skills (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011). The final predictor variable was staffing level change since March 2020 which reflected no changes in staffing, the elimination of positions, or reduction in

work hours/furloughs. We considered this variable a job resource in the JD-R framework (Demerouti & Bakker, 2011) because it represents a support to which HEPs may have had access. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for these variables.

We included two outcome variables in our analysis: burnout and turnover intention. Respondents were provided with the following definition of burnout: “Burnout is defined as ‘when you get to a feeling of exhaustion with life. It’s not just physical or psychological exhaustion, it’s everything together. But instead of collapsing and saying, ‘I can’t do this anymore,’ you hit a wall and climb over it’” (McClure, 2020, para. 6). Respondents selected from a series of five ordinal responses, as shown in Table 1. We utilized burnout as a predictor of turnover intention and as an outcome predicted by job demands and resources.

The second outcome variable was one’s intention to leave their career earlier than they anticipated. Turnover intention was measured with three categorical responses: “Yes, I am considering leaving my profession earlier than anticipated,” “Yes, I am more committed to staying in my career,” and “No, the last six months have not significantly impacted my career decisions.” For our analysis, we recoded these responses into a dichotomous variable that represents whether individuals considered leaving their profession earlier than anticipated. Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for these variables.

Understanding that institutional characteristics are related to an individual’s turnover intentions and work environment (Dahlvig & Beers, 2018; Rosser & Townsend, 2006), we included institutional control, institution level, and a ratio of full-time equivalent (FTE) student enrollment headcount to FTE staff positions as variables in our models. Additionally, we included a variable for institutionally reported COVID-19 cases given the potential impact on job demands. Given the skewness of the original COVID-19 data, we used log transformation to

make the data as "normal" as possible, and thereby increase the validity of our quantitative analyses.

## **Data Analysis**

Following an explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018), we first analyzed the quantitative data using multiple regression. Guided by those findings, we conducted thematic analysis of qualitative data to nuance our findings.

### ***Quantitative Analysis***

We examined the survey data and tested whether our data met the assumptions associated with ordinal and binary logistic regression (Box & Tidwell, 1962; Stevens, 2002). We also confirmed that our log transformation of the original COVID-19 data resulted in a log-normal distribution. After ensuring our analysis met relevant assumptions, we conducted a cumulative odds ordinal logistic regression with proportional odds (Liu & Koirala, 2012) to examine whether job demands and resources are statistically significant predictors of burnout. Next, we conducted a hierarchical binary logistic regression (Keith, 2015) to investigate whether job demands and resources and burnout are statistically significant predictors of turnover intention. We entered the following sequence of variables into the regression model: (1) institutional characteristics, (2) job demands and resources, and (3) burnout. To extend our analyses, we added the natural log of the number of institutionally reported COVID-19 cases as an additional predictor in both models.

### ***Qualitative Analysis***

After completing the qualitative analysis, we engaged in thematic analysis (Ryan & Bernard, 2003) of survey questions that asked how burnout manifested for them and their

colleagues and to describe changes in staffing levels in the respondent's unit. We began by *in vivo* coding 100 random responses (Saldaña, 2013), creating codes using respondents' words. We included *a priori* codes from our quantitative findings including staff level changes, transition of services, front-line student service, and organizational proximity to the chief executive. Next, we conducted collaborative axial coding (Saldaña, 2013), creating axial codes. We coded the remaining responses using the axial codes and *in vivo* coding when responses did not align with any of the axial codes (Saldaña, 2013). We collaboratively reviewed new *in vivo* codes to create new axial codes every 100 responses. After coding all responses, we engaged in constant comparison between cases (Ryan & Bernard, 2003), examining how responses varied based on organizational proximity to the chief executive, transition of functions and services, and staff level changes as these were statistically significant variables in at least one of our quantitative models.

We utilized multiple strategies to ensure trustworthiness in our qualitative analysis. We reflexively engaged with how our own experiences during the pandemic may have informed our analysis (Berger, 2015; Shenton, 2004). In frequent meetings, we ensured that we were creating a shared understanding of the data (Shenton, 2004). Twenty-five percent of responses were coded by both authors to ensure codes were applied consistently, and in our meetings, we resolved any disagreements in code applications.

### ***Mixed Methods Analysis***

Integration of quantitative and qualitative data is key to mixed methods research (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). We used a single source of data which is inherently a mixed methods approach (Bazeley, 2006). Additionally, we utilized our findings from our quantitative analysis to guide our qualitative analysis (Bazeley, 2006; Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

Finally, we crafted joint displays of our findings (Tables 5 and 6) to integrate findings visually (Gutterman et al., 2015).

### ***Positionality***

Our positions as scholars, caretakers, and people influenced how we approached this study (Berger, 2015). One of the authors serves on AACRAO's Research Advisory Board. This relationship helped provide access to the data, but we were not involved in survey design or dissemination. Our employment may have been more secure than many of our respondents, as a faculty member and graduate student. We recognize that as White, male scholars who worked remotely during the pandemic, we were in many ways shielded from harms even though we worked as caretakers of loved ones young and old while social distancing. In our analysis, we consistently centered the humanity of HEPs to understand their experiences, with care for their stories.

### **Limitations**

We recognize that our data have meaningful limitations as they do not include demographic information. Previous research using the JD-R framework did not include participants' gender, race, or ethnicity (e.g., Demerouti et al., 2001). However, this may not be a justifiable assumption in studying burnout during the COVID-19 pandemic because of disproportionate effects on communities of color (Gracia, 2020; Molock & Parchem, 2021) and women and single parents with increased caretaking responsibilities (Calarco et al., 2021; Power, 2020). Race, ethnicity, and gender have been shown to influence burnout in HEPs as well (Anderson, 2021; Howard-Hamilton et al., 1998; Steele, 2018). However, we believe that our

findings may be the ‘best case’ scenario, and women and HEPs of color may have even greater turnover intentions and burnout than our averages.

## **Findings**

Our explanatory sequential mixed methods (Creswell & Plano-Clark, 2018) approach required us to first analyze the quantitative data and then use those findings to guide our analysis of open-ended survey responses. We observed that quantitative questions alone could not capture the variety and intensity of HEPs’ experiences amid COVID-19.

### **Quantitative Findings**

Using multiple regression (Keith, 2015), we investigated two related questions. First, how do job-demands and resources predict burnout, and second, how do demands, resources, and burnout predict turnover intention.

#### ***Predicting Burnout***

We conducted an ordinal logistic regression to determine the effects of job demands and resources on the reported burnout among HEPs. We determined that there were proportional odds as assessed by a full likelihood ratio test comparing the fitted model to a model with varying location parameters,  $\chi^2(33) = 47.301, p = .051$ . The deviance goodness-of-fit test indicated that the model was a good fit to the observed data,  $\chi^2(4089) = 3010.761, p = .736$ , but most cells were sparse with zero frequencies in 79.2% of cells. However, the final model statistically significantly predicted burnout over and above the intercept-only model,  $\chi^2(11) = 36.647, p < .0005$ . The model explained approximately 3.5% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .035$ ) of the variance in reported burnout.

Among the job demands and resources examined, the transition of functions and services had a statistically significant effect on the prediction of reported burnout,  $\chi^2(2) = 23.347, p < .0005$ . The odds of those who experienced significant disruption when transitioning remote work reporting significant burnout was 1.713 times that of those who experienced little disruption. This had a statistically significant effect,  $\chi^2(1) = 14.407, p < .0005$ . Similarly, the odds of those who were unable to or did not transition remote work reporting burnout was 1.751 times that of those who experienced little disruption. Additionally, while one's proximity to the chief executive was not a statistically significant predictor in the overall model ( $p = .079$ ), the odds of respondents with positions as a chief executive reporting burnout was reduced by a factor of .614 compared to HEPs at lower levels of the organizational hierarchy, ( $p = .047$ ). Table 5 summarizes these findings.

To extend these findings, we added the number of reported institutional-level COVID-19 cases to the ordinal logistic regression to determine the effects of COVID-19 cases on the prediction of burnout. As before, the model had proportional odds,  $\chi^2(36) = 47.869, p = .089$ , and was determined to be a good fit for the data based on the deviance goodness-of-fit test,  $\chi^2(3100) = 2226.943, p = 1.000$ , but most cells were sparse with zero frequencies (79.0% of cells). However, the final model statistically significantly predicted burnout over and above the intercept-only model,  $\chi^2(12) = 38.689, p = .000$ . The model explained approximately 4.8% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .048$ ) of the variance in reported burnout. The addition of the number of COVID-19 cases to the model contributed approximately 1.3% to the explanation of variance in reported burnout. However, the COVID-19 variable was not a statistically significant predictor of reported burnout,  $p = .232$ . Notably, transition of functions and services remained a

statistically significant predictor in the overall model,  $\chi^2(2) = 22.540, p = .000$ . Table 6 summarizes these findings.

### ***Predicting Turnover Intention***

We conducted a hierarchical binary logistic regression to examine the effects of job demands and resources and burnout on the prediction of turnover intentions. A Hosmer and Lemeshow Test (2000) indicated that the model was a good fit for the observed data,  $\chi^2(8) = 9.892, p = .273$ . The overall model was a statistically significant improvement compared to the base model,  $\chi^2(15) = 124.690, p < .0005$ . The model explained approximately 15.5% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .155$ ) of the variance in turnover intention and correctly classified 73.6% of cases. Sensitivity was 11.7%, specificity was 78.3%, positive predictive value was 60.0%, and negative predictive value was 24.1%.

Among the job demands and resources variables, only staffing level changes was statistically significant for those employed at institutions at which some staff positions were eliminated,  $\chi^2(1) = 7.923, p = .005$ . The odds of those employed at an institution where some staff positions were eliminated reporting an intent to leave their career was 1.713 times that of those employed at an institution where all staff were kept fully employed. Additionally, our analysis revealed the statistically significant effect of burnout on the prediction of turnover intention. Burnout was a statistically significant predictor of turnover intention among those who reported a “definite sense of burnout,”  $\chi^2(1) = 8.622, p = .003$ , and a “significant sense of burnout,”  $\chi^2(1) = 33.524, p < .0005$ . The odds of those with a “definite sense of burnout” reporting an intent to leave their career was 3.221 times that of those who reported “little burnout.” Similarly, the odds of those with a “significant sense of burnout” reporting an intent to

leave their career was 11.035 times that of those with “little sense of burnout.” Table 7 summarizes the findings for the overall model.

To extend these findings, we conducted a hierarchical binary logistic regression to examine the effects of job demands and resources, burnout, and the number of reported institutional-level COVID-19 cases on the prediction of turnover intentions. As before, a Hosmer and Lemeshow Test (2000) indicated that the model was a good fit for the observed data,  $\chi^2(8) = 5.978, p = .650$ . The overall model was a statistically significant improvement compared to the base model,  $\chi^2(16) = 93.838, p = .000$ . The model explained approximately 15.4% (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .154$ ) of the variance in turnover intention and correctly classified 75.1% of cases. Sensitivity was 12.2%, specificity was 76.3%, positive predictive value was 60.8%, and negative predictive value was 22.4%. This suggests that the COVID-19 cases variable does not contribute to the prediction of turnover intention.

None of the job demands and resources variables were statistically significant. However, consistent with the previous model, the analysis indicated that burnout was a statistically significant predictor of turnover intention among those who reported a “significant sense of burnout,”  $\chi^2(1) = 16.526, p = .000$ . The odds of those with a “significant sense of burnout” reporting an intent to leave their career was 8.315 times that of those with “little sense of burnout.” Table 8 summarizes the findings for the overall model.

### **Qualitative Findings**

After analyzing our quantitative findings, we coded and analyzed open-ended survey responses. We grouped our axial and *a priori* codes from our quantitative analysis into two themes: work during a pandemic and personal life during a pandemic. We disaggregated our

qualitative findings by the statistically significant quantitative variables to investigate how different variables were associated with our codes to inform our presentation of our findings. Tables 5 and 6 are joint displays (Gutterman et al., 2015) with qualitative codes disaggregated by our outcome variables.

### ***Work During a Pandemic***

Respondents described ways that burnout manifested in their work and working conditions in four ways: additional work, working remotely, changes to teamwork, and changes to work quality. While we expected responses to vary by the statistically significant quantitative variables, these codes were evenly distributed among quantitative categories.

**Additional Work.** For respondents, employment in higher education during a pandemic required work beyond typical job responsibilities. This key challenge was driven by multiple factors including reductions in staff, working online, and pandemic-related job tasks. When staff were reduced through furloughs, retirements, or reduction in staff, often they were not replaced because of hiring freezes. Therefore, “co-workers have had to [absorb] other duties” beyond their typical work expectations without additional staffing. Many respondents indicated working 70 to 80 hours per week, yet described how “it’s never enough” to meet all the demands.

Many respondents discussed how the shift to remote work increased their workload. Working online allowed respondents to have more meetings, as they are easier to schedule online, but that left “little time during the day to get my own work done” leading to “more 10+ hour days” and “weekend work.” Working from home also frequently eliminated boundaries between work and home, creating the sense that respondents were “now living at work.” Exemplifying the perception of constant work, one respondent wrote that “As a manager said to

me ‘We are all working 24/7 and it’s expected.’” This suggests that expectations of remote work were constant. This culture of continuous work had other negative impacts on employees outside of the workplace.

Respondents described new job tasks to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. Some front-line employees who worked on campus or responded to parents of students had particularly troublesome experiences. One respondent discussed how they had to navigate working with parents of students who felt that “the university caused this and should fix it” and had little care about the employee. HEPs frequently expressed concern about the constantly changing plans from institutional leadership. For example, one respondent described that they had “excessive overtime trying to meet the demands resulting from poor planning by upper administration.” Generally, some respondents felt that “no one show[ed] appreciation for the work being done.”

Additional work during a pandemic was not a surprising finding. However, among those increased workloads, respondents described troubling trends that made work in higher education largely unsustainable including additional work with less staff, working constantly online, and navigating changing directives from leadership. This indicates that institutions often did not prioritize employees as people, placing HEPs in untenable situations.

**Remote Work.** While remote work created additional work for employees, respondents described other ways that it impacted their work. Employees encountered technological issues such as the lack of stable internet connection or adequate technology. One respondent described how “no stipends are being offered to offset costs for technology” while others described how peers were furloughed until they could be provided appropriate technology. Finally, some participants described how remote work limited interactions with peers and students and their work was not as fulfilling as it was before. Online working conditions were often not fully

supported by institutions to ensure employees' success, particularly during changing conditions. To respondents, institutions could have better supported employees to decrease this cause of burnout by ensuring all staff had adequate technology and maintaining clear expectations for using personal contact information.

**Teamwork.** The pandemic also influenced how employees collaborated. Frequently, respondents described how colleagues had “short temper[s]” or “more negativity and less creativity” in meetings and work. Working remotely removed informal opportunities for staff to “be together to commiserate and vent and brainstorm solutions.” Individuals felt crunched for time and unable to find time for informal meetings. Occasionally, respondents described how interdepartmental collaboration was particularly challenging, as they lacked strong interpersonal relationships. While the qualitative responses that described collaboration were generally pessimistic, a few individuals noted how their teams collaborated effectively. One respondent wrote that their team was “still doing all they can to be kind to each other and help each other.” While working collaboratively was generally a challenge in the pandemic, some teams recognized that many challenges were beyond their control.

**Quality of Work.** Working during a pandemic had an impact on the quality of work performed. Commonly, respondents described “small errors and mistakes,” “decreased productivity,” a harder time focusing on “more thought-heavy” tasks, or a “lack of interest in non-immediate projects.” HEPs often reflected on their own change in work habits that led to changes in their performance.

Several respondents described how other people's work habits did not meet expectations. For example, one individual, who is one report removed from the chief executive, wrote that “many members of my team are not as engaged as they need to be in their work since they are

working from home.” Another respondent, lower in their organizational hierarchy, shared that “staff have lost focus, not getting tasks done in a timely manner” and “not realizing that work hours need to be adhered to.” These perspectives highlight how work expectations may not have adjusted to account for the pandemic’s role in HEPs’ lives.

### ***Personal Life During a Pandemic***

Respondents discussed how suffering from burnout during a pandemic impacted their personal lives, including their emotional and mental health.

**Emotional and Mental Health.** Over half of respondents described some mental or emotional symptoms of burnout. Frequently, respondents expressed feelings of anxiety, fatigue, depression, exhaustion, and low morale. Remote work played a role in HEPs’ emotional stress suggesting that “the stress of work is mixed with the stress of home life.” Many respondents expressed how the length of the pandemic was particularly challenging and has led to “feeling depressed each day because things aren’t getting better in the world.” The stress of working during the pandemic also led some HEPs and their colleagues to “have weekly mini breakdowns where we just cry.”

While these manifestations of mental health struggles were common, some respondents also discussed their feelings toward higher education, occasionally planning to leave the field completely. Typical of these responses was “pessimism about the future of higher education” and feelings of being “grossly abused as a human resource.” HEPs’ pessimism about the future of their field or their organization’s lack of care for their well-being may negatively impact their productivity, ability to navigate the pandemic, and future career plans.

**Personal Life.** Respondents also shared how their personal lives were upturned. Often, respondents described “struggling to get out of bed in the morning.” Sometimes respondents were “made to feel guilt just for taking one day off,” while others were “not given a weekend to refresh their mental and emotional health.” HEPs noted how they were required to work on urgent projects on vacation days. When HEPs would take time off they felt that “time off = more catch-up” once they returned to work.

Respondents frequently described challenges related to childcare and parenting. Multiple individuals described contradictory expectations from their employer and their child’s school, especially as grace provided early in the pandemic was not extended for its duration. One parent wrote that “being required to return to a face-to-face setting disallowed me to keep my child home to pursue remote learning” and that they “maintained the responsibilities of my position...with great detriment to my emotional and physical health.” Even parents who were not required to return to campus described the unique burdens they faced. One respondent wrote that “As a parent having to remote teach my children and keep up with work has not been easy and the demand from my institution to prove how hard I work is frustrating.” This HEP had not only to care for children, but also “prove” how hard they work. This disconnect between expectations for K-12 schooling and the higher education workplace was particularly problematic for caretakers.

While many experiences surrounding the personal impacts of working during a pandemic focused on childcare and mental health, we noted several other important trends. Multiple respondents noted that their physical health was negatively affected including “higher blood pressure” and returning to or being prescribed anxiety medication. Respondents noted that they

did not have “the energy or motivation to participate in leisure activities, hobbies, etc.” on which they typically relied to relieve stress.

### **Mixed Methods Findings**

It is important to note where our quantitative and qualitative findings diverged. Staffing level changes, and transition of functions and services were statistically significant predictors in at least one of our regression models. However, our qualitative analyses found that these variables did not have differences in the quantity of codes that reflect each of these variables.

One construct that was meaningful in the qualitative analysis and statistically significant in some of our regression models was one’s organizational proximity to the chief executive. However, these constructs were operationalized differently which warrants further discussion. The quantitative measure indicated the number of supervisors between an employee and chief executive, while the qualitative measure captured how respondents’ positions within the organization influenced their experience, including feeling ignored or having support for their direct reports. These different operationalizations highlight the varied ways that organizational proximity matters for HEPs. One middle manager shared that “executive leadership does not share the concerns and fears of my front-line workers.” HEPs in positions at lower levels of an organizational hierarchy expressed concerns about how senior staff managed the institutional response to the pandemic. One typical response included that “senior staff has not recognized these increased workloads and lack of resources.” Even when these supervisors noticed their hard work, some respondents noted that supervisors did “nothing to address burnout.” When respondents discussed lower-level employees, they were often framed as a concern. For example, one manager instituted daily check-ins and when staff were just “saying what they think we want

to hear, but are not producing results,” they followed up with staff members individually to provide support.

However, this generosity towards HEPs was not uniform. Some described how employees “[pushed] back on standard functions of [the] job” or had “poor time management and too many distractions when working from home.” While these respondents have concerns about their fellow employees’ productivity, the tone of some respondents did not consider the personal lives of their colleagues.

### **Discussion & Conclusion**

During the pandemic, HEPs faced unprecedented changes to their work and job expectations to keep communities, workers, and students safe. Our mixed-methods analysis indicated that these work environments were challenging in multiple ways.

First, our quantitative findings reaffirm that findings of previous research on burnout and turnover in higher education remain relevant during the COVID-19 pandemic. We find that individuals who were able to transition to remote work without significant disruption had decreased odds of burnout. Through the JD-R framework (Demerouti et al., 2001), a difficult transition to remote work is a job demand associated with increased burnout. While productivity may have decreased for HEPs working remotely, our evidence shows that the decreased burnout associated with a seamless transition to remote work may improve an institution’s employee retention rate. We find that significant levels of burnout are a predictor of HEPs’ increased turnover intentions, reaffirming prior research on student affairs professionals (Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018). Thus, burnout during the pandemic may be similar enough to burnout before COVID-19 for institutional leaders to plan responses to improve the working conditions of HEPs using earlier scholarship.

Second, our qualitative findings illuminated common reasons for burnout. These included additional work and constant availability to address work-related problems. These findings are not new to higher education, as similar working conditions in the field led to burnout, fatigue, and departure (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen, Malone, et al., 2018; Wilk, 2016). However, many previous studies of the higher education workforce study one segment of the organizational hierarchy, such as entry-level employees or middle managers. Our data include a cross section of the organizational hierarchy and show that one's location in the organizational hierarchy informs one's perception of the organizational response to the pandemic and working conditions, like prior research on furloughs in higher education (Pelletier et al., 2015). We recommend that future research continue to examine how one's position within an organization informs perceptions of working conditions.

Our qualitative findings highlighted many job demands placed on HEPs during COVID-19. Less apparent were resources to address challenging conditions. While some respondents described team-level support structures, these resources were not common. Instead, when HEPs described job resources they emphasized the *lack* of resources like adequate technology or meaningful time off, both of which contributed to their burnout. Institutions can therefore make it clearer what resources are available to support staff by developing and disseminating clear policies about remote work expectations and support available to employees.

Finally, we share recommendations about how future research can draw upon our findings. First, our mixed methods approach allowed us to capture challenges of working during the pandemic that were not accounted for in the close-ended survey items including decreased productivity and mental and emotional health of HEPs. Instead of adapting our findings into new quantitative questions, we encourage researchers and institutional agents to utilize the strengths

of mixed methods research and include open-ended items for qualitative analysis. This should be part of a comprehensive approach to data collection during the pandemic that allows respondents to articulate their personal experiences navigating this ever-changing situation.

Respondents also noted that institutions were occasionally aware of challenges but did not change practices. Institutional research on workplace conditions should therefore include plans to enact change to support employees, not simply collect and analyze data. Our qualitative findings emphasized the additional burdens on parents, a commonality with other COVID-19 research (e.g., Calarco et al., 2021; Power, 2020). Recent research has found that children of HEPs internalize their parent's bad days at work (Lehman & Krebs, 2018). Therefore, we urge future researchers to directly consider how HEP workplace conditions amid the pandemic may have affected HEPs who are parents and children.

Since respondents completed AACRAO's October 2020 survey, COVID-19 vaccines have been developed and have become widely available in the United States for those twelve and older. Most college campuses have returned to in-person instruction and HEPs are largely back on campus. Yet, COVID-19 cases on college campuses are on the rise and higher than when our data were collected (New York Times, 2021). As such, our calls for practices that center the humanity of all HEPs and systemic changes to address burnout (Peterson, 2020; Squire & Nicolazzo, 2019) may be more dire than our evidence shows. HEPs have increasingly vocalized concerns about practices that emphasize institutional finances instead of their health and work-life balance (Ellis, 2021). Various industries have begun experiencing a "Great Resignation" because of a growing discontent with workplace conditions (Hirsch, 2021). For institutions of higher education to avoid this fate and high rates of turnover, they must adjust their practices

from burning through HEPs (Anderson, 2021) to prioritizing the humanity of their workforce by making institutional-level reforms to navigate the challenges to come.

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Table 1. *Descriptive Statistics of Survey Responses*

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
Organizational proximity to chief executive		
Chief executive	66	6.1
One report	385	35.6
Two reports	346	32.0
Three or more reports	283	26.2
Front-line student service		
Provides front-line student service	127	11.8
Does not provide front-line student service	953	88.2
Transition of functions and services		
Remote work transitioned with little disruption	626	58.0
Remote work transitioned with significant disruption	225	20.8
Remote work unable to be transitioned/not transitioned	229	21.2
Staffing level change		
All staff kept fully employed	754	69.8
Some staff had reduced hours/were furloughed	167	15.5
Some staff positions were eliminated	159	14.7
Burnout		
Little to no sense of burnout; no concerns about the pace of future work	65	6.0
Slight sense of burnout; no concerns about the pace of future work	184	17.0
Some sense of burnout; some concern about the pace of future work	234	21.7
Definite sense of burnout; concerned about the pace of future work	421	39.0
Significant sense of burnout; significant concern about the pace of future work	176	16.3
Turnover intention		
Intends to leave the profession earlier than anticipated	316	29.3
Does not intend to leave the profession	764	70.7

**Table 2.***Descriptive Statistics of the Institutions Represented by the Survey Respondents*

	<i>n</i>	Percentage
FTE enrollment headcount		
28 – 2,000	272	25.2
2,001 – 10,000	431	39.9
10,001 – 18,000	130	12.0
18,001 or more	247	22.9
FTE staff		
6 – 500	332	30.7
501 – 2,000	385	35.6
2,001 – 7,000	224	20.7
7,001 – or more	139	12.9
Institutional control		
Public	552	51.1
Private	528	48.9
Institutional level		
Four or more years	947	87.7
Less than four years	133	12.3

**Table 3.** *Summary of Job Resources and Demands as Predictors of Burnout*

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
	Odds Ratio (SE)	Odds Ratio (SE)
Organizational proximity		
Chief executive	0.614* (0.245)	0.658 (0.315)
One report	0.978 (0.138)	1.008 (0.162)
Three or more reports	1.185 (0.149)	1.260 (0.164)
Provides front-line student service	0.820 (0.178)	0.680 (0.208)
Transition of functions and services		
Remote work transitioned with significant disruption	1.713** (0.142)	1.971** (0.164)
Remote work unable to be transitioned/not transitioned	1.751** (0.143)	1.745** (0.166)
Staffing level change		
Some staff had reduced hours/were furloughed	1.247 (0.159)	1.245 (0.180)
Some staff positions were eliminated	1.342 (0.157)	1.251 (0.184)
Institutional control: private	1.028 (0.122)	0.977 (0.141)
Institutional level: less than four years	0.910 (0.183)	2.02 (0.382)
FTE student to staff ratio	1.001 (0.002)	1.000 (0.002)
COVID-19 cases, logged		0.958 (0.036)
<i>n</i>	1,080	830
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.035	0.048

*Note.* *SE* = standard error. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ . Reference categories: organizational proximity: two reports; front-line student service: does not provide front-line student service; transition of functions and services: remote work transitioned with little disruption; staffing level change: all staff kept fully employed; institutional control: public; institutional level: four or more years.

**Table 4.** Summary of Job Resources and Demands and Burnout as Predictors of Turnover Intentions

	<b>Model 1</b>	<b>Model 2</b>
	Odds Ratio (SE)	Odds Ratio (SE)
Organizational proximity		
Chief executive	1.122 (0.323)	0.651 (0.384)
One report	1.238 (0.178)	0.590 (0.402)
Three or more reports	0.893 (0.196)	0.633 (0.387)
Provides front-line student service	1.399 (0.227)	0.800 (0.271)
Transition of functions and services		
Remote work transitioned with significant disruption	1.301 (0.177)	0.817 (0.251)
Remote work unable to be transitioned/not transitioned	1.043 (0.183)	0.843 (0.206)
Staffing level change		
Some staff had reduced hours/were furloughed	1.018 (0.206)	1.464 (0.293)
Some staff positions were eliminated	1.713** (0.191)	0.983 (0.233)
Institutional control: private	0.738 (0.160)	1.238 (0.184)
Institutional level: Less than four years	1.158 (0.238)	1.337 (0.489)
FTE Student to staff ratio	1.000 (0.002)	0.998 (0.003)
Slight sense of burnout, no concern	1.476 (0.434)	1.012 (0.546)
Some sense of burnout; some concern	2.004 (0.414)	1.403 (0.524)
Definite sense of burnout; concerned	3.221** (0.398)	2.179 (0.507)
Significant burnout, significant concern	11.035** (0.415)	8.315** (0.521)
COVID-19 cases, logged		0.940 (0.046)
Constant		0.334 (0.805)
<i>n</i>	1,080	830
Nagelkerke $R^2$	0.155	0.154

*Note.* SE = standard error. \*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*  $p < 0.05$ . Reference categories: organizational proximity: two reports; front-line student service: does not provide front-line student service; transition of functions and services: remote work transitioned with little disruption; staffing level change: all staff kept fully employed; institutional control: public; institutional level: four or more years.

**Table 5.** Joint display of qualitative themes, disaggregated by level of burnout

	Little Sense <i>n</i> = 65	Slight sense <i>n</i> = 183	Some sense <i>n</i> = 235	Definite sense <i>n</i> = 420	Significant sense <i>n</i> = 177	Overall <i>n</i> = 1,080
<b>Working in a pandemic</b>						
Additional work	2 (3.1%)	31 (16.9%)	45 (19.1%)	111 (26.4%)	49 (27.7%)	238 (22%)
Collaboration	2 (3.1%)	22 (12%)	38 (16.2%)	76 (18.1%)	35 (19.8%)	173 (16%)
Impacts on work quality	1 (1.5%)	19 (10.4%)	35 (14.9%)	73 (17.4%)	27 (15.3%)	155 (14.4%)
Organizational hierarchy*	5 (7.7%)	26 (14.2%)	29 (12.3%)	73 (17.4%)	47 (26.6%)	180 (16.7%)
Remote work concerns	9 (13.8%)	22 (12%)	29 (12.3%)	66 (15.7%)	24 (13.6%)	150 (13.9%)
Staffing level change*	10 (15.4%)	38 (20.8%)	43 (18.3%)	85 (20.2%)	46 (26%)	222 (20.6%)
<b>Personal life in a pandemic</b>						
Concerns about future	3 (4.6%)	15 (8.2%)	17 (7.2%)	36 (8.6%)	18 (10.2%)	89 (8.2%)
Emotional & mental health	12 (18.5%)	78 (42.6%)	113 (48.1%)	239 (56.9%)	117 (66.1%)	559 (51.8%)
Personal life	5 (7.7%)	37 (20.2%)	45 (19.1%)	115 (27.4%)	57 (32.2%)	259 (24%)

*Note.* Percentages are column percentages. Codes with asterisks (\*) represent *a priori* codes.

**Table 6.** Joint display of qualitative themes, disaggregated by increased turnover intention

	Yes <i>n</i> = 317	No <i>n</i> = 763	Overall <i>n</i> = 1,080
<b>Working in a pandemic</b>			
Additional work	66 (20.8%)	172 (22.5%)	238 (22%)
Impacts on work quality	44 (13.9%)	111 (14.5%)	155 (14.4%)
Collaboration	61 (19.2%)	112 (14.7%)	173 (16%)
Organizational hierarchy*	74 (23.3%)	106 (13.9%)	180 (16.7%)
Remote work concerns	43 (13.6%)	107 (14%)	150 (13.9%)
Staffing level change*	79 (24.9%)	143 (18.7%)	222 (20.6%)
<b>Personal life in a pandemic</b>			
Concerns about future	31 (9.8%)	58 (7.6%)	89 (8.2%)
Emotional & mental health	188 (59.3%)	371 (48.6%)	559 (51.8%)
Personal lives	78 (24.6%)	181 (23.7%)	259 (24%)

*Note.* Percentages are column percentages. Codes with asterisks (\*) represent *a priori* codes.