Burnout and Working Conditions in Higher Education During COVID-19: Recommendations for Policy and Practice

By Jake D. Winfield and Joseph H. Paris

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, public health concerns required higher education institutions to transition teaching, learning, and administrative functions online (Turk, *et al.* 2020). The economic impact of the pandemic required many institutions to cut costs through layoffs, furloughs, or reduced hours for staff (Bauman 2021; Ellis 2021). These conditions presented numerous and noteworthy challenges for higher education employees including burnout, intentions to leave the field of higher education, and negative effects on physical health and wellbeing (McClure 2021; Winfield and Paris 2022).

Burnout is a state of physical or emotional exhaustion that also involves depersonalization and a sense of reduced accomplishment, stemming from chronic workplace stress (Maslach 2003). Some higher education professionals experience stressful workplace conditions such as extended business hours and increased responsibilities despite declining resources. Other factors such as unclear job expectations, limited opportunities for career advancement, and insufficient compensation may exacerbate burnout and increase an employee's intent to leave higher education (Lorden 1998; Marshall 2016; Mullen, *et al.* 2018).

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers (AACRAO) surveyed its members about their experiences and institutional policies (Kilgore 2020b). As an extension of this work, the authors analyzed data from AACRAO's October 2020 survey (Kilgore 2020a) to better understand and document higher education working conditions during the pandemic and their potential impact on higher education. From this research and analysis of higher education professionals' experiences and perceptions across hundreds of institutions in the United States, the authors gleaned important lessons for leadership and institutional researchers to consider during the current pandemic and future campus emergencies. The work showed multiple ways to improve the experiences of higher education professionals including transparent decision-making, having an empathetic approach to leadership, and using institutional research in times of crisis. This article shares recommendations for higher education leaders to inform institutional practices designed to support the working conditions of higher education professionals during emergencies.

Research Summary

The authors conducted an explanatory sequential mixed method study (Creswell and Plano Clark 2018) 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 (Winfield and Paris 2022). In October 2020, AACRAO disseminated a survey (Kilgore 2020a) to members to capture respondents' experiences and perceptions about how COVID-19 had impacted their working conditions, changes in workplace responsibilities, and stressors related to the pandemic. Survey respondents included 1,411 AACRAO members across fifteen countries. In the analysis, the authors restricted the sample to individuals who work at institutions in the United States with complete responses (1,080 respondents across functional areas within 782 institutions). To analyze the data, the authors first analyzed the quantitative survey data using multiple regression. Guided by the quantitative findings, the authors then conducted thematic analysis of the open-ended qualitative survey data to gain a more nuanced understanding of the quantitative findings.

The quantitative findings were consistent with recent research on burnout and turnover in higher education (Anderson 2021; Marshall, *et al.* 2016; Mullen, *et al.* 2018; Wilk 2016). The authors found that individuals who experienced a difficult transition to remote work had increased odds of burnout and that significant levels of burnout predict increased turnover intentions. The qualitative findings revealed common causes of increased burnout among higher education professionals during the pandemic such as unsustainable workloads and expectations of constant availability to address work-related issues. Respondents cited a lack of resources to support remote work such as adequate technology while simultaneously describing increased demands to fulfill their job. The research also captured the impact of COVID-19 on respondents' work productivity and mental, emotional, and physical health. Importantly, respondents shared how their burnout extended into other aspects of their lives such as limiting their ability to care for children or other loved ones.

Recommendations for Higher Education Leadership

The authors' analysis and data focused on the experiences of higher education professionals. However, the authors also gained insights more germane to institutional leadership that may provide a path forward during the pandemic and in future emergencies including institutional decision-making processes, focusing on empathetic leadership, and using institutional research to guide institutional responses during a crisis.

Institutional Decision-Making

Many higher education professionals in this study described how decision-making processes at their institutions during COVID-19 were opaque and they frequently had to navigate shifting goals. For example, one respondent observed "people [are] generally frustrated with the decision-making process on campus and the lack of transparency around how decisions are made" while another recognized it was "difficult for many who feel their expertise and knowledge of the work is not being taken into account when decisions are made by central administration." Respondents also described constantly changing institutional priorities and that "mixed and complex messages from the administration made work expectations unclear from week to week." To address this concern, institutional leaders should set clear expectations for how decisions are made before times of crisis, while simultaneously recognizing that these priorities may shift during uncertain times. Decision-making protocols should include ways to develop and disseminate clear policies for new, unexpected, and unpredictable challenges. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the rapid shift to remote work for most employees across higher education was one of these unexpected challenges. Many employees discussed frustration about how new policies intended to delineate expectations and responsibilities were unclear. For example, a respondent stated that personal cell phone numbers were shared with other employees without their permission. This made coworkers "livid" and they felt that "they were on call 24×7." Prior planning about how to communicate rapidly changing situations may alleviate this concern as employees would have received information through an expected communication channel. Shifting priorities during an emergency are certain to occur—but transparency and clear communication with employees through pre-planned means may alleviate these concerns.

Beyond institutional communication, leaders should also plan responses to improve the working conditions of higher education professionals during times of crisis. This research found that employees had very different experiences during the pandemic based on their position in the organizational hierarchy. Therefore,

those in leadership positions should create mechanisms for collecting feedback from middle managers and entry-level workers about how employees across the institution are experiencing and navigating the emergency. Feedback systems should provide leaders with ample opportunities to listen to employees and enact meaningful changes—not just catalog challenges or relying on self-care rhetoric (Squire and Nicolazzo 2019) without making employees' lives better. Institutional responses to crises must not only relieve employee stress but be meaningfully actualized by setting realistic expectations, shifting the focus from individual productivity to collaboration and community, and centering the humanity of higher education professionals.

Empathetic Approaches to Leadership

Relatedly, the authors found that some higher education professionals observed that their supervisor(s) lacked empathy for their experiences. One respondent shared that their experience working from home was challenging because "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." Another respondent recognized that as the pandemic persisted, empathetic leadership decreased saying they felt that "'grace' is not offered as freely as it was at the start of the pandemic." In times of crisis, the authors believe that leaders who demonstrate care for their employees will have a more sustainable organization during and after the crisis. Employees are necessary for fulfilling an institutional mission. As such, an institution's mission cannot supersede the wellbeing of its employees, even during uncertain times. Employee wellbeing must be prioritized when making decisions to ensure the institution continues through the crisis successfully supporting its mission.

Directions for Future Institutional Research

Finally, this study highlighted ways in which institutional research can be leveraged to support employees during emergencies. In the mixed methods approach, the authors found that closed-ended quantitative questions did not capture the range of professionals' experiences. For example, the quantitative components of the survey did not ask about the impact of COVID-19 on one's life outside the workplace such as whether they were care-

givers. The open-ended qualitative responses allowed respondents who are parents to articulate the unique challenges they faced that would not have been captured otherwise. Emergencies require flexible approaches to understanding phenomena and their impacts on a variety of stakeholders. Accordingly, the authors encourage higher education leaders and institutional researchers to account for how experiences may not be captured or represented in quantitative measures. Mixed methods approaches allow researchers to understand how unexpected responses become salient—and illuminate problems that quantitative analyses alone may not find. The authors acknowledge that mixed methods research is labor intensive; however, even a cursory analysis of open-ended responses can provide further insight into the efficacy of or need for certain policies on campus. As noted above, respondents described how institutional leaders were aware of challenging working conditions but did not change their practices. For example, a respondent described how they work at a "campus that 'talks' about caring but 'actions' speak louder than words." The authors consider institutional research a part of the process to address concerns about workplace conditions and reiterate that research without action may only exacerbate the frustration and dissatisfaction employees experience during times of crisis.

Campus shutdowns and rapid transitions to remote online teaching and business operations placed unprecedented pressures on many higher education professionals who simultaneously navigated campus re-opening planning, public health mandates, and concerns from students and other stakeholders. In response, higher education employees are burnt out and are calling for changes within their institutions (Ellis 2021; McClure 2020 2021; Winfield and Paris 2022). During the current crisis and in anticipation of the future, the authors recognize the importance of strong, empathetic leadership to ensure that higher education institutions fulfill their missions while supporting their employees. The analysis of survey data collected from more than 1,000 higher education professionals shows that by having clear decision-making processes, empathetic leaders, and using institutional research to ground actionable improvements, higher education leaders can develop flexible but supportive structures for employees to fulfill their institutional mission.

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About the Authors

Jake D. Winfield is a Ph.D. candidate in policy and organizational studies at Temple University's College of Education and Human Development. Prior to graduate studies, he taught high school mathematics in Arkansas and Arizona. His research interests center on the intersection of community–university relationships and college access for minoritized students using a variety of methods.

Joseph H. Paris is Executive Director of Graduate Admissions at the West Chester University of Pennsylvania. Previously, he served as assistant professor of higher education at Temple University. His research and teaching focus on the intersection of institutional effectiveness and college student success and draw upon his professional experience in enrollment management and higher education marketing. His work analyzes the relationships between college admissions criteria and selection methodologies, institutional finance, and access to postsecondary education.