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## How to Support Your Staff Beyond the Pandemic

Six best practices for creating a better campus work culture.

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*This essay is excerpted from a new Chronicle special report, “Solving Higher Ed’s Staffing Crisis,” [available in the Chronicle Store](#).*

Campus leaders have been so focused on crisis management since March 2020 that we’ve had little time to distill the enduring lessons of Covid-19. As we emerge from the pandemic and manage an ever-changing work environment, many leaders are still looking for the best affordable ways to support stressed staff members. We would like to make the case for a shift — building on the “trauma informed” crisis management of recent years — to a “care centered” approach.

By that, we mean a set of practical strategies to help campus leaders and supervisors apply Covid-era lessons to current and future contexts.

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Why us? Two reasons. First, we surveyed staff members at our institution (the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee) about their experiences during the pandemic, specifically related to stress and coping. We also examined how pre-pandemic experiences influenced reactions to the pandemic. After analyzing data from more than 600 respondents, we developed a few implications for campus practices and policies, which we outline below.

Second, we designed and led a voluntary Campus Cares workshop on trauma-informed care. It was 60 to 90 minutes of training offered to students, faculty, and staff in various campus settings. The idea was to provide information on the impacts of trauma and stress, offer coping strategies, and create a space for people to share their experiences and connect with one another. Since August 2020, we have completed more than 100 such workshops.

Together, those experiences, as well as our own research and service, have shaped the practices and policy recommendations we offer here. Aimed at promoting staff satisfaction, retention, productivity, and well-being, they represent what we think are best practices for creating a caring and effective work environment.

Before we dive in, a couple of caveats:

- Remote-work options and equitable pay have been the subject of many articles, so we won't touch on them here. Pay, in particular, is important, but we also

believe that multiple strategies can work in concert.

- Accountability and care are not mutually exclusive but, rather, mutually reinforcing. For instance, caring for staff members involves holding them accountable to institutional values, policies, and laws.
- Our recommendations may not apply to every work setting. Consider tailoring relevant strategies in a way that honors the experiences of staff and the uniqueness of the work environment.
- To whatever degree that care-informed leadership was present before 2020, it should be amplified in post-pandemic academe.

We've heard a lot of folks argue that higher education shouldn't return to business as usual in the aftermath of the pandemic but should instead develop a "new normal," with healthier individual and collective habits. We agree. The pandemic has been stressful for many and even traumatically stressful for some. Perhaps it has provided an unwelcome opportunity to reassess our values and practices and to install a few upgrades. Here are six we suggest:

**Highlight the value of working on a college campus, and involve the staff in the effort.** As we sit here now, our campus is bustling with students, staff, and faculty, and it reminds us why we do this work — being part of a community and serving others. Covid prompted many staff members to question the worth of a career on a college campus. We hear from staff members that it is demoralizing when a leader promotes the public-service component of their work without acknowledging the pain of the pandemic, the challenges caused by staff shortages, and the noncompetitive wages paid in higher education compared with the private sector. Essentially, saying "we pay you less because you work at a college" does not resonate.

Still, it's true that campuses (for the most part) cannot pay the same as private industry and that we offer the opportunity to do some level of mission-driven work. For some members of the work force, that really matters. There is an opportunity to serve and contribute to the public good in higher education, to work with college

students (who are mostly a joy), and to create benefits for new generations. Our institutions do offer staff members the chance to collaborate with talented people and connect meaningfully with those who share common values and interests.

Two important components of developing a sustainable work force are creating collective values and conveying them through communication, hiring, retention, and promotion practices. Post-Covid, try co-creating a shared purpose or mission within teams or units. It empowers staff members to consider what role they play in that common mission.

We heard from staff and faculty members who said they want to be involved in strategic conversations. A department could therefore first consider discussing individual values and how its members' values show up in their work. Second, the department could extrapolate its values to a common mission and strategic direction that complement the department's purpose.

As we exit a crisis, it is important to clearly communicate purpose and be clear about what is not changing. What are the bedrock principles of the campus? Communicate them clearly and often. It may help to articulate the message that, despite the crisis of the day, the team and the institution remain committed to certain values.

**Wherever possible, allow staff members to engage in deep work that aligns with their values, requires focused attention, and produces meaningful results.** This values-oriented work dovetails perfectly with a lesson from our research and practical experiences: A commonly identified coping strategy during stressful times was finding “meaning” in work.

Certainly some staff positions involve tasks that have to be done, meaningful or not. But you can foster meaning by encouraging people to take on projects they feel motivated by — that they can lose themselves in. Ask staff members: How can they connect their personal values with a campus initiative? Or, how could someone

initiate a project that fulfills a pressing campus need? Having conversations about such possibilities allows people to translate their values into actions, especially for staff members who often feel disconnected or far away from the mission.

**Create opportunities for staff members to work beyond their unit on projects that contribute to the broader campus.** Meaning seems to be an important component of creating a vibrant work culture on campus. When we surveyed staff members at our institution, we found that they cited campuswide projects as among the most consequential work they did — work that connected them to departments outside their own, to campus sectors they didn't normally interact with, and to new colleagues who had similar passions and personal values. This work allowed staff members to engage in strategic thinking, planning, and execution.

The collaborative strategy also invokes another key mitigator of pandemic-related stress: social support. Collaborative efforts allowed staff members to expand their on-campus social networks. We know that these connections were paramount in helping people persevere through stressful and traumatic events of the pandemic. Finding community in the workplace was — and is — incredibly important, no matter the size of one's team. Now and in the years ahead, we need to continue to do more work to bring staff and faculty together for dialogue, foster affinity, and further support community-building.

**Make sure communications are clear, direct, and honest.** Tell the staff the real story about the institution's financial health and other challenges. In our survey and workshops, we found that communication — the direct, empathetic kind — was a key component of staff satisfaction. Many staff members told us that they want to hear about the “hard stuff” their college is facing (such as budget cuts and crisis management).

While we seem to have passed the acute stages of the pandemic, academe continues to face plenty of challenges that warrant this type of communication. Hearing straight

talk from leaders makes staff members feel like they are part of the campus team, working toward a common purpose.

**Let an ethic of care guide how you communicate with staff — empathize and listen deeply.** Just because people want the truth doesn't mean they appreciate a harsh, cold delivery of bad news. Empathy is key. Starting with a people-first and care-first approach in all communications is helpful, even if the news itself is troubling. That means first acknowledging people's feelings — apprehension, fear, sadness — before going into the logistics of a controversial decision.

And don't do all the talking. Make sure that your messaging allows for reciprocal dialogue (e.g., town halls) rather than a top-down information transfer. In our survey and workshops, we often heard staff members say they valued bilateral communication pathways.

Consider organizing a town hall for staff members to ask questions of senior leaders — either directly or submitted anonymously. It's important for you as a supervisor to provide opportunities for your staff to hear directly from you, to listen to them, and to respond in a way that shows you care and are interested in how the issue or topic is affecting the questioner. This is key — leadership's ability to truly listen and not just attempt a quick fix or offer an empty promise.

Create opportunities for people to broaden their support network in the workplace. No matter the size of your team, a sense of community is incredibly important and can mitigate the negative impacts of a crisis.

**Model self-care as a leader.** Staff members repeatedly indicated to us that they appreciated the encouragement for self-care they received from supervisors. It improved organizational culture and work satisfaction. They were even more impressed, however, when a supervisor modeled self-care — because the leader's behavior underscores what is expected and encouraged in the workplace.

Staff members feel encouraged to practice self-care when they see their supervisor do so (e.g., go on vacation, take lunch away from their desk, chat with colleagues). Simply put, the culture often reflects the leader, and staff members take cues from their supervisor.

So aim to systematically integrate self-care (physical and mental) into office practices. For example:

- Dedicate a few hours a week, or a day a month, to self-care.
- Use your vacation time instead of stockpiling it as evidence of how hard you are working.
- Make humor a part of the work culture (when appropriate).

Our recommendations represent a modest attempt to shift the campus conversation from trauma to care — in the service of greater job satisfaction, staff retention, work productivity, and personal well-being. Our goal as campus leaders and supervisors should be not just to retain the lessons of the pandemic but to build on them and improve how we work.

*We welcome your thoughts and questions about this article. Please [email the editors](#) or [submit a letter](#) for publication.*

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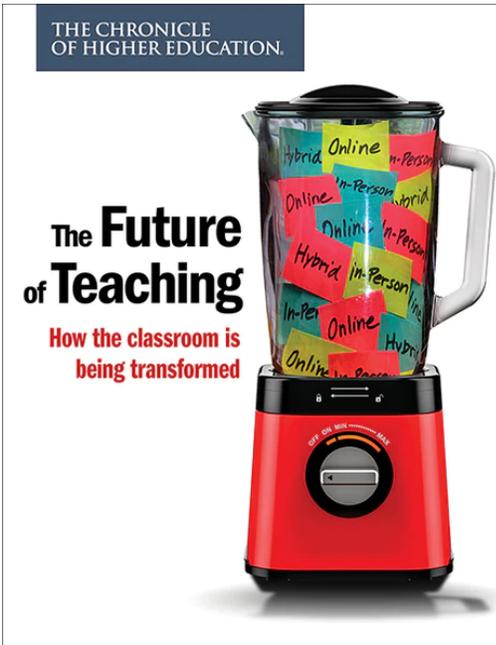
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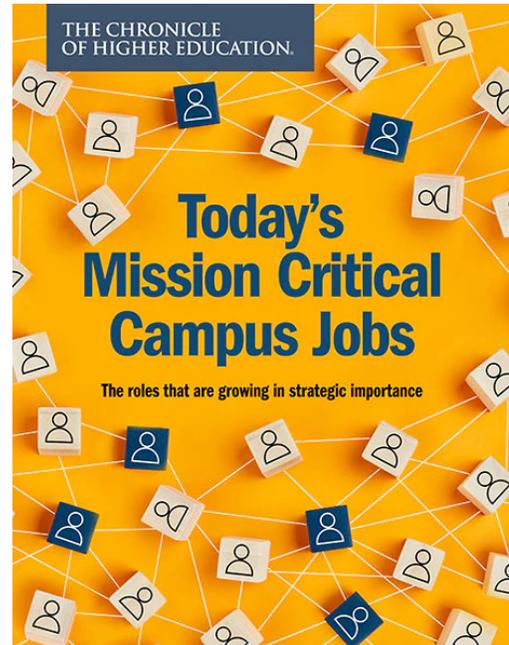
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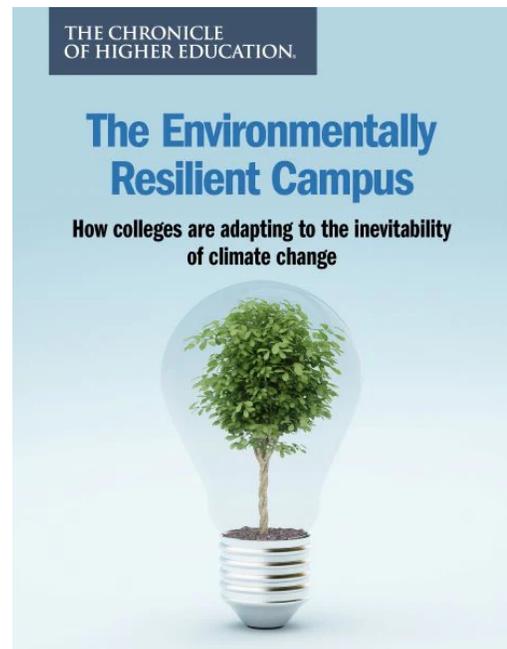
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