



Fostering authentic collaboration on campus

How administrators can create and sustain trust with faculty

However much faculty and administrators recognize the critical importance of effective collaboration and meaningful shared governance in advancing their institutions' missions, their roles can at times come into conflict when threatened by certain external, and even internal, forces. These might include demographic shifts, increased competition, enrollment challenges, financial management decisions, political conflict on campus, and debates over the state of shared governance. When that happens, collaboration between the two groups, and ultimately institutional resilience, can be negatively affected.

With resilience and sustainability genuine concerns for many institutions, particularly small- to mid-size colleges and universities, the need for senior administrators to foster more authentic collaboration with faculty is urgent. When strong collaboration practices are present, even institutions facing financial hardship can marshal their resources effectively to set a course for sustainability.

IN BRIEF

- With resilience and sustainability genuine concerns for many colleges and universities, the need for senior administrators to foster more authentic collaboration with faculty is urgent.
- Research shows that faculty and administrators share many of the same interests and concerns, offering opportunities to reinforce common ground, especially related to the education mission and student success.
- Building and sustaining trust requires focusing on a shared purpose and encouraging greater collaboration through authentic engagement, including representation and recognition for faculty, clear and open communication, and financial transparency.

Focus on a shared purpose

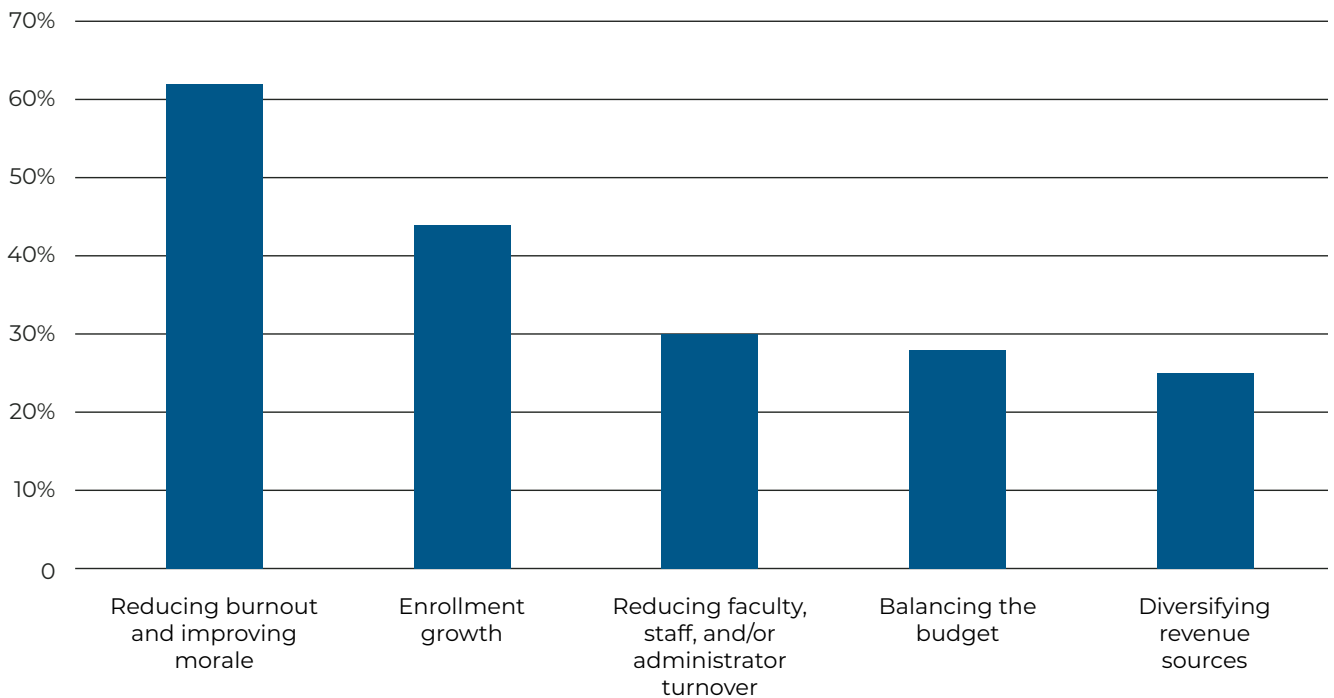
[Huron research](#) conducted in collaboration with the American Council on Education and The Chronicle of Higher Education shows that faculty and senior administrators share many of the same concerns about the current state of higher education, including rising costs (63% of faculty and 75% of administrators), the negative public perception of higher education (63% for both groups), and declining enrollment (48% of faculty and 52% of administrators).

They also agree that the greatest opportunities for establishing common ground and shared interest are related to the educational mission, vision, and values (65% of faculty and 68% of administrators) and student success (63% of faculty and 82% of administrators).

“Although they may approach their roles from different perspectives, faculty and executive leadership are united by a shared purpose: to deliver on the promise of higher education to transform lives,” said Jennifer Ramey, principal at Huron. “Efforts to build trust and foster more productive collaboration should begin there. Acknowledging and emphasizing this shared purpose can bridge gaps and create a more cohesive working environment.”

When asked to identify the top goals for defining institutional success, reducing burnout and improving morale, reducing faculty, staff, and/or administrator turnover, and balancing the budget were among the top five selections for faculty.

Top five faculty goals for defining institutional success



Achieving these goals can only happen when administrators and faculty work better together. “Substantive change requires intentional effort,” added Ramey. “It takes a commitment from executive leadership to plan, execute, and nurture initiatives for building greater trust with faculty over the long haul. The most effective administrators prioritize engaging with faculty, listening to their concerns, and demonstrating that their input is valued and considered in decision making.”

“Building and sustaining trust between faculty and administrators is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort and commitment from both groups.”

Encourage greater collaboration

Initiatives to build trust and provide opportunities for faculty voices to be heard are available at most colleges and universities. Yet, according to the research, while 36% of administrators think shared governance at their institutions is strong, only 16% of faculty feel it is as strong as it could be, suggesting that initiatives to encourage greater collaboration and shared decision making may be falling flat.

Lack of consistency can degrade a culture of collaboration. It is worth noting that the tenure of college and university presidents shrunk from an [average of 8.5 years in 2008 to 5.9 years in 2023](#), resulting in more frequent leadership transitions. Administrative turnover in other key roles can similarly impede consistent approaches to mutual engagement between faculty and administrators.

Building and sustaining trust between faculty and administrators is an ongoing process that requires intentional effort and commitment from both groups. Improvement can only happen when people are open to change and willing to work earnestly and consistently to reciprocate efforts in fostering authentic collaboration and delivering meaningful outcomes for their students and communities.

Faculty identified a number of priorities when it comes to improving trust and strengthening collaboration between themselves and administrators, including the following:

- **Representation and recognition:** Faculty are looking for a seat at the table and seeking greater participation in decision making. Seven out of 10 faculty members responded that it is important for them to be personally involved in the development of their institution’s next strategic plan.
- **Clear and open communication:** Opportunities to learn about and contribute to decisions made by the board and executive leadership are critical to facilitating authentic communication. Regular meetings, transparent updates, and open forums where faculty can voice their concerns are essential.

Administrators should strive to communicate the rationale behind decisions, explaining why certain actions are taken or why specific requests cannot be accommodated. Information should also cascade to faculty promptly. They want to be involved when policies are set, not merely informed after decisions are made.

- **Financial transparency:** Making budgetary decisions is hard. Senior administrators have multiple considerations, many outside the faculty's purview. Administrators should provide clear, detailed explanations of the institution's financial health and the factors influencing budget decisions.

"There needs to be a better, shared understanding of the institution's economics," said Lee Smith, managing director. "Demystifying revenue sources and providing more budget transparency are critical for helping faculty understand financial realities."

An effective approach, for example, can be adopting a zero-based budgeting process, which involves faculty in discussions about financial priorities and trade-offs.

- **Celebrating success:** More unites administrators and faculty than divides them. One way to showcase unity is to celebrate collective accomplishments consistently and visibly for all of campus to see. Validating progress fosters a sense of community and reinforces that everyone is working towards the same goals. It also helps demonstrate to faculty that senior administrators support their contributions.

Effective management in higher education hinges on fostering authentic collaboration between faculty and administrators. By focusing on shared interests around the educational mission and student success, institutions can enhance resilience and sustainability, even amid external pressures. Clear communication, financial transparency, and celebrating collective successes are crucial to building trust. When both groups commit to working together, they can achieve substantive change that delivers the transformative promise of higher education, benefiting students and the broader community alike.



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