Prioritizing Faculty and Staff to Sustain and Improve Institutional Success

By Susan Basso

More than two years after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, supporting faculty, staff and students is more critical than ever. With changes spanning from engagements with students to workforce expectations, colleges and universities — and the people who help run them — are having to adapt and evolve at an unprecedented pace.

Putting students' needs first is key to an institution fulfilling its academic mission. Yet ensuring the needs of students are balanced with the needs of faculty and staff is essential, as faculty and staff are critical to student success. Therefore, establishing a positive employee experience on many fronts for faculty and staff is important to the longevity and health of an academic institution.

There are several critical talent management strategies an institution can employ to help improve the employee experience of its faculty and staff. Due to the dynamic nature of higher education, change initiatives that ensure the experience is positive and inclusive are essential. For example, some institutions have been shifting policies to allow faculty and staff more flexibility in their working arrangements. This deviation away from an approach where everyone returns to campus has been received positively by employees, many of whom have indicated they're able to be more productive and engaged remotely.

It is leadership's job to connect with faculty and staff and ensure they can provide input and feedback on the ongoing changes, which requires a deliberate, intentional and open approach. Institutions will be best served if they focus on their people as their most important assets — supplemented by sturdy support processes enabled by modern technologies.

Supporting faculty and staff's holistic needs

People make an institution what it is. Yet in a recent report from The Chronicle of Higher Education, two-thirds of faculty member respondents said they were struggling with more work and a deteriorated work-life balance. To teach effectively and thoughtfully, online delivery requires more time, and adding the attention required to address the mental health crisis among students, faculty members feel they are stretched to their limits. International data from Future Forum's Remote Employee Experience Index suggest that 83% of employees across all industries no longer want to work in person five days a week. Furthermore, 20% of employees indicated they wanted to work remotely full time. Since the start of 2020, The Chronicle respondents also said they felt worse or about the same in meeting their responsibilities in teaching, service, research and publishing, and mentoring students.

It's clear that flexibility and work-life balance are needed — and that's not even considering the generational changes that are occurring in higher

education. Employee demographics in higher education have shifted significantly. With faculty choosing to step away or retire, the age group coming into the workplace has many different expectations, having come of age in a more tech-oriented environment. How do we balance high-tech, high-touch planning with the need to offer increased flexibility?

It goes beyond making sure day-to-day needs are met. It's ensuring that faculty and staff members have sufficient balance with their teaching, research and administrative responsibilities; creating a stronger environment to retain and recruit them; and continuing to provide the work flexibility that occurred because of the pandemic. It's also about supporting and celebrating the work of faculty members, their interactions with students, and their contributions to the success of the larger organization — showing them that they are key to what makes the institution exceptional and they are needed for its success.

What it means to put people first

Providing adequate support and addressing the needs outlined above begins with reexamining both processes and policies. This includes enabling faculty members to do what they do best and lifting administrative burdens where feasible so that they can continue to be drivers of student success — offering choice and tools that enable seamless work in the office or at home. While this may mean new operating models or new technology that may require an initial learning curve, the end results are workflows that are much simpler and more intuitive.

While technology doesn't optimize personal connection, often it's the successful implementation of technology solutions that can bridge generational and structural divides. Such outcomes can provide

more connection and collaboration than before. Seeing technology as just a work tool diminishes its importance in strategy and how it can be integrated into the fabric of people's day-to-day work lives to enhance their experience.

Creating channels of communication that allow for feedback loops is important for creating opportunities to hear directly from employees on what they want and how to enhance their work experience. For example, implementing a routine cadence of focus groups can be an engaging way to keep everyone connected and mindful of necessary changes.

Effective change in higher education requires a more hands-on approach given the unique governance structure of most colleges and universities. Shared governance in higher education enables each department, academic leader and faculty member to have a voice in what happens next at the university. Engaging with these academic members of the campus is critical, as their influence represents the essence of the entire institution. Acknowledging, respecting and honoring the diverse array of campus leaders as well as faculty — even if they are not directly involved or otherwise engaged in the change process — can create greater buy-in in the long term.

Given the time that instituting any change can take, the key to success will be helping faculty and staff members balance their own responsibilities with the time and effort required for adapting to new workflows and actively participating in the institution's growth and future success. Though it takes time, incorporating faculty and staff into the readiness and planning processes associated with technology changes and other transformations from the beginning helps make everyone feel they are being prioritized and heard.

Key Takeaways

Creating an exceptional workplace while operating a thriving institution means change is inevitable. Initiatives that focus on improving the faculty and staff experience through improved technology tools represent steps toward evolution. But it must be a continuous process — and one that requires transparency and all stakeholders playing a part in the institution's evolution and success. Leading with strategy while designing a technology-oriented future that empowers faculty to do their best work and drive change will enable a truly exceptional experience for all stakeholders — faculty, staff and students.

Think differently.

Help faculty and staff members recognize the importance of their collaboration in not only the success of their contributions to students and research outcomes but also the long-term health of the institution.

Plan differently.

The processes that human resources and academic leaders build need to be designed in support of delivering an exceptional experience, educationally as well as for faculty and staff. Plan to receive and incorporate feedback from employees into the process to ensure all needs are being met.

Act differently.

Transparency and education are crucial components of any people-driven work. Keep an open dialogue on what people are working on, how key stakeholder needs are influencing the change, and how any changes will benefit employees directly.

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