Can Workplace Wellness Become the New Normal?

Understanding burnout and well-being solutions for institutions, managers, and teams

By Meredith Barnett
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Even working extra hours, "it's never enough."

"The stress of work is mixed with the stress of home life."

"No one [shows] appreciation for the work being done."

This is how some higher education staff members described their work life in late 2020 to Temple University researchers. And if any of those statements ring true to you, you're not alone.

The survey, published in the April 2022 *Journal of Education Human Resources*, polled staff from 782 colleges and universities working in enrollment management, admissions, and administrative roles, revealing widespread stress and ballooning workloads that in the last few years have taken a toll on their mental health.

"We're all seeing [stress] in our workplaces and the impacts from it—both in terms of organizational productivity but also (and more importantly) how it affects people and families that we know and care about," says Larissa Holtmyer Jones, President and CEO of the Iowa State University Foundation, U.S. She's spent the last 25 years at the foundation, and today, she's seeing her team and her colleagues at other institutions looking for solutions for mental wellness.

"We're all trying to navigate this," she says. "But it's not easy."

The pandemic and the Great Resignation have created new levels of stress and mental health challenges for teams around the world. Here's a snapshot of mental health in today's advancement workplaces—including what institutions, leaders, and individuals can do to address burnout and support well-being.

Mental Health Now

Globally, mental health among workers is at an all-time low. According to Gallup's 2022 *State of the Global Workplace* report that surveyed workers in 160 countries, only a third of employees worldwide are "thriving," which is defined by Gallup as having positive views of one's life and optimism about the next five years. The World Health Organization reported the COVID-19 pandemic triggered a 25% increase of anxiety and depression worldwide.

As we covered in *Currents*, students' mental health was particularly impacted during the pandemic. But college and university faculty and staff have struggled too: three in 10 university staff members report feeling "drained" from their work every day, reported the U.K. nonprofit Education Support in a survey of 2,046 university staff. For faculty, the problem has been particularly acute; recent media coverage has highlighted excessive workloads and a pressure-cooker atmosphere, spurring an exodus from academia.

Though advancement professionals face different stressors than their colleagues in academia, the work can be mentally taxing—be it from hectic traveling schedules, the always-on nature of university communications, or hefty fundraising goals. Some 84% of development professionals feel a "tremendous pressure" to succeed, according to an AFP Global survey.

Fundraising is goal-oriented, which carries "inherent stress," explains Margaret Katz Cann, a coach with Fundraising Leadership. She and her colleague Michelle Maloy Dillon have seen in their clients an uptick in stress and exhaustion. In part, they say, it's because COVID-19 imbued advancement work with urgency. Development teams launched emergency funds and rallied support for research and student needs. But now?

"I see many of them having a bit of mission crisis. [They're saying] 'how does this [work] still feel important and relevant to me after what I've witnessed?'" says Cann.

Plus, there's the added layer of people management, she says: "We have to care about our donors and return their calls promptly; we have this veneer of how we're supposed to act. But for many of us during COVID, the veneer cracked a little bit."

> "I am convinced that from a business perspective, as well as the higher education perspective, your people will make or break the success of your institution. Happy, healthy people are better employees than unhappy, unhealthy people."

Kyle Braithwaite, Senior Development Director, Weber State University

The "Perfect Recipe for Burnout"

Now, the Great Resignation has added a new dimension to the state of mental health in the workplace. For some education institutions, the pandemic spurred turnover, layoffs, and furloughs: U.S. higher education lost 40,000 jobs from 2020 to now, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Though some teams are rehiring now, many have been operating with roles unfilled or aren't replacing positions lost—without a substantial pay increase for current staff, explains Jackie Bichsel, Director of Research at the College and University Professional Association for Human Resources.

"The fact is, this is what's creating a crisis," she says. "You can only do that for so long before you've basically concocted the perfect recipe for burnout."

Three traits define burnout: feelings of exhaustion; feelings of negativity or cynicism related to one's job; and reduced professional efficacy, according to Gallup. Beyond the personal toll, burnout and poor mental health have dire consequences for teams: they decrease productivity and morale, and spur turnover. For each additional 10 hours worked beyond 31 to 40 hours, the proportion of higher education staff who report poor mental health increases by around 5%, according to Education Support research.

"Burnout is an underlying theme that we're seeing in our coaching conversations," says Dillon. "All of the systems that were dismantled haven't quite been rebuilt into whatever the 'new normal' will be."

Thriving and Positive Climate

What, then, does positive mental health look like in higher education workplaces?

It's a question Kyle Braithwaite has investigated recently. He's Senior Development Director at his alma mater, Weber State University in Ogden, Utah, U.S., and has spent much of his career in higher education. Along the way, he saw how much mental health matters in this work he loves.

"I am convinced that from a business perspective, as well as the higher education perspective, your people will make or break the success of your institution. Happy, healthy people are better employees than unhappy, unhealthy people," he says.

For his dissertation at the University of Utah, he studied employee well-being, thriving, and burnout, surveying staff at Weber State about their perceptions of how much their supervisors and the institution cared about their well-being. He homed in on the concept of thriving, a psychological state in which people experience a sense of vitality and learning.

Ultimately, thriving staff members have positive views of their life situations, and report less stress, anxiety, and health issues, according to Australia's Future of

Work Institute. And research links well-being to better retention, workplace safety, and productivity.

When asked what higher education staff are satisfied with in their jobs, having a good supervisor relationship, being safe from harm, feeling like work has a purpose, and being valued by others are at the top of the list in CUPA-HR's data.

Staff are more likely to thrive if they feel supported by their managers and their organization, says Braithwaite—and beyond that, thriving at work is built on organizational environments of autonomy, fairness, and transparency.

Flexibility and Workload Support

At the University of Western Australia, Chief Advancement Officer Fiona Allan and her team have made flexibility key for their work environment. During pandemic lockdowns, the division piloted flexible and hybrid work options, retaining a two-days-per-week remote work strategy. The team's grateful for it and has continued to meet targets, says Allan.

"In this office, we're about 80% women, and we have men and women who have children at school age. It's important for them to be there for their families a bit more," she says.

Overwhelmingly, staff want remote and flexible work options—though many institutions don't provide that, the CUPA-HR survey revealed.

"Most employees are saying, 'Hey, I performed well at home during the pandemic. Why can't I continue to do so? … This is what higher ed needs to start doing to make people feel valued," Bichsel says.

Not every job in advancement can be done remotely—but organizations can consider how to build in flexibility, like half-days or closing the office one Friday per month. Ultimately, burnout and stress in higher education won't be solved unless organizations "pay people more, recognize them, and find ways to alleviate the workload," Bichsel stresses.

What Institutions Can Do: Frameworks, Visibility, Training

Amid this mounting research and global attention on mental health, more institutions and leaders are taking action.

Back in 2020, nine in 10 university presidents surveyed by *Inside Higher Ed* said mental health was their top concern—but fewer than one in 10 said their institution had invested in more mental health resources. By 2022, more than half of presidents say their institutions can now meet student and staff mental health needs. Many (71%) say their institutions increased budgets for mental health services and invested in telehealth services, and 23% say they've expanded time-off policies for staff.

Some universities have built mental health into their strategic plans or introduced institution-wide mental health strategies. The University of Western Australia launched its Mental Health and Wellbeing Framework in 2022, shaped by recommendations from student surveys and staff focus groups. For it, Allan and her team marshalled funds to launch a peer-to-peer initiative called The Living Room. (It went on to win a 2022 Circle of Excellence Award.)

One of essential step: make mental health more visible, says Holtmyer Jones. That could mean launching a broad awareness campaign (Pacific University in Oregon, U.S., has named 2022-2023 a Year of Wellness and Action), or ensuring information about resources like counseling or an employee assistance program is clear and available. The Iowa State University Foundation has changed its sick leave to simply health leave—demonstrating that mental health is health, says Holtmyer Jones.

"At the core of this, we all have to continually work on that visibility (including the language we choose around mental health) and be that advocate for connecting people to resources that they might need and value," she says.

Organization-wide training is also crucial; staff on both Allen and Holtmyer Jones's teams have taken mental health first aid training courses. Training helps managers and leaders "sync up," making sure they can handle situations with a colleague or student with "compassion and with as much consistency as possible," says Holtmyer Jones.

What Teams and Leaders Can Do: Conversations and Community

Individual staff members can build their awareness of their institution's mental health resources and assess their own wellness—but stress and burnout are also organizational issues.

"Thriving takes individual effort—these are called agentic behaviors, things you're actively doing" like bonding with colleagues, says Braithwaite. "But unless you work in an environment with socially embedded principles that focus on health, well-being, care, you don't have the capacity to act in an agentic way. Organizations really are at the heart of burnout and thriving."

Cultivating a supportive community starts with managers. Be open with your team members about mental health and ask them what solutions might help them (rather than making assumptions about what they need), Cann and Dillon suggest. For instance, Queens University in Canada sought input from each member of its advancement team about culture and work-life balance. Its Building a Better Workplace Program won a 2022 Circle of Excellence Award for talent management.

"There's an incredible hunger for authentic, real conversations in the workplace. If you as a leader can start an actual conversation about what is going on in your organization, everything shifts," says Cann.

And since fundraising is often competitive and goal-driven, managers should thoughtfully approach conversations about performance, advises Holtmyer Jones.

"When you see someone struggling, do you lead with, 'Why aren't you hitting your metrics?' or, 'Tell me what's going on,'" she says.

Ultimately, everyone on a team can help build and bolster a community of mental health support, Holtmyer Jones points out. Community-building for wellness can take many forms. Iowa State University Foundation has held employee-led sessions (like support groups) to give staff opportunities to share personal mental health challenges and learn from one another. The University of Queensland in Australia created a directory of "mental health champions," staff who have received training and can discuss mental wellness with colleagues. Staff gather for a mental health book club at the University of Pittsburgh, U.S. Meanwhile, UC San Francisco in California, U.S., created a grant program to fund staff activities that build a culture of well-being. Awarded projects included a group painting activity and a lunch-and-learn for caretakers.

These ties can remind staff that they're not alone.

"We want to make sure that as a community, we can support people in need as much as celebrating those people when they do amazing things," says Allan.

Wellness as the "New Normal"

Moving forward, Allan and her colleagues—like other advancement teams around the globe—will continue to navigate work-life balance and how to build healthy, productive work environments. At a future planning session, for instance, Allan's team is going to troubleshoot questions about flexibility like: how should colleagues contact one another outside "traditional" work hours? What guidance can help staff find work/life balance?

For institutions, leaders, and staff around the globe, maintaining healthy workplaces will take ongoing dialogue, problem-solving, and support. Teams are, right now, mapping the norms that will shape work experiences tomorrow. Explore the action steps below for how teams, leaders, and individuals can address mental health and cultivate thriving.

Action Steps for Staff Mental Health

What Institutions and Leaders Can Do

- **Make mental health a visible priority.**
  One of the essential steps for institutions to is to clearly highlight mental health as a priority. That could mean launching a broad awareness campaign or ensure information about available resources (counseling or an employee assistance program, for example) is clear and available. Reiterate that mental health is health, says the Iowa State University Foundation's Larissa Holtmyer Jones.

- **Offer organization-wide trainings.** Give staff the opportunity for mental health first aid training. Training helps managers, leaders, and staff support their colleagues or students with compassion and consistency, says Holtmyer Jones.

- **Strive to offer flexibility and workload support.** There's a disconnect in higher education with what employees prefer for flexibility and what their arrangements are, says Jackie Bichsel, Director of Research at CUPA-HR. Not every job in advancement can be done remotely—but organizations can consider how to build in flexibility, she says.

- **Address the underlying factors of burnout.** Other supports are band-aids if an organization's not addressing employee satisfaction, pay, and workload. Kyle Braithwaite, Senior Development Director at Weber State University, likens this to a mining operation: "You could strap little gas masks onto the canaries, but that doesn't solve the issue of carbon monoxide in

the mine. Burnout is an indicator of the social environment."

What Managers Can Do

- **Have conversations with your staff about mental health.** Be open with your team members about mental health. Fundraising coaches Margaret Katz Cann and Michelle Maloy Dillon advise leaders to ask team members what would help them. "Be willing to say, 'I don't have all the answers here. But what would help you with your burnout? If I want to give you some extra time off, what would that to look like for you?" says Dillon.
- **Demonstrate care for your team members.** Staff members experience less burnout if they feel their organization and manager cares about them, Kyle Braithwaite's research shows. Communication is key, he says: getting to know team members, thanking them for their contributions, and celebrating their wins.

What Teams Can Do

- **Build a community of support.** Create opportunities for team members to see they're not alone. The University of Iowa has held employee-led sessions (like support groups) for staff to discuss personal mental health challenges, for instance.
- **Connect the work to impact.** Advancement teams are often great at connecting their work to impact for donors—but what about staff? "Are we doing the same thing for our own employees? Are we showing our employees that what they do matters?" says Braithwaite. Take the time to thank colleagues.

What Individuals Can Do

- **Build your awareness.** Understand your institution's resources or trainings on mental health—but beyond that, consider how stress may be impacting you. When staff members are overwhelmed, they may not realize they're burned out—especially since high stress can both increase irritability and fear, and reduce cognitive brain function. Understand the signs of burnout and mental health issues like depression.

  "It often starts at an individual level—naming, 'Oh, I'm feeling angry right now,' or 'I'm feeling frustrated.' Because the moment we can name what's happening in us, we now have a choice as to what to do about it," says Dillon.

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