

## THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

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ADVICE

# Right Now, Your Best Employees Are Eyeing the Exits

To stay, they need better pay, reasonable hours, and an end to mission-based gaslighting.

By *Marci K. Walton*

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LINCOLN AGNEW FOR THE CHRONICLE

Right now, your best midlevel manager is updating her résumé. Your hardest-working director is controlling his excitement after learning the salary range for a private-sector opening. Your most trustworthy entry-level professional is writing a resignation letter because her new corporate position doubles her pay and doesn't require nights or weekends.

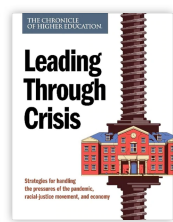
Two years of pandemic life have left campus staff members beyond burned out. They are done. And they are leaving or thinking about it in droves. I know because I was one of them. After nearly 13 years working in residence life — a field to which I was deeply committed — I left higher education last March for the private sector. The move increased my salary by 50 percent and cut my workload in half.

Since then, countless staff members have reached out on social media to ask about my job search and departure. When I led a couple of free webinars recently for people

in higher education mulling a career change, more than 200 registered. In early February, I recounted what I heard in those webinars on [a Twitter thread](#) that attracted dozens of comments. Then in preparing this essay, I asked an online forum of current and former student-affairs professionals, “What do senior leaders need to know about morale?” I quickly received hundreds of comments and pleas from staff members at every type of institution, office, and experience level. (They allowed me to share their comments below but requested anonymity.)

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The gist: Very little is keeping them at your institution. You are hemorrhaging talent and institutional knowledge. The pandemic has forced many labor sectors to fundamentally shift how they view work, and if campus leaders fail to do the same, no one will be left to help you “get back to the way things used to be.”

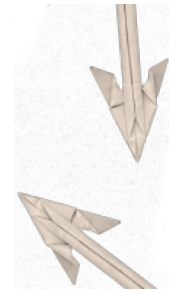
Here’s what staff members need their institutions to know, hear, and most important, act upon:

**Stop engaging in mission-based gaslighting.** Stop saying things like, “What did you expect to get paid? You work in education!” or “You should be grateful to still have a job,” or “We don’t get paid much, but it’s worth it to see a student’s growth.” By using the mission to make your staff members feel ridiculous for asking for a raise or better benefits, you are shutting down legitimate concerns. People are rapidly realizing they have a skill set that can be used elsewhere — in positions that benefit others without being subjected to such treatment.

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**Cancel the curse of competence.** Stop rewarding the highest-achieving professionals with more work and their lowest-achieving counterparts with fewer responsibilities. It's just lazy management.

**Embrace remote work.** “Remote work is a retention effort,” one staff member told me. “Senior leaders must adapt or they will continue to lose employees to remote-work opportunities.” Administrative reluctance to allow staff members to work from home stems from a misplaced understanding of what students actually want. For example, dozens of staff members in student affairs said their offices continue to offer students a choice between an online or an in-person meeting even though students consistently choose Zoom. The result: Staff members end up commuting to the campus and sitting in their offices, only to spend the entire day in online appointments. One commenter lamented that her university shuts off VPN access during business hours to force staff members to work on the campus. If you really care about meeting students' needs, allow your staff to adjust their work lives to students' preferences.

**Redefine productivity.** During the early days of Covid, your student-affairs team performed miracles. They helped students on study-abroad trips return safely from around the world. They shifted orientation programming online and developed a slate of engaging online activities. They did all of this from their homes. If they could be trusted to accomplish such projects with no planning time, why can't they be trusted now? One commenter wants “senior level folks to understand that productivity does not mean being in my office.” So, what's more important? Productivity or presence? If presence is truly more important, those professionals whose work does require them

to be on the campus should be well-compensated, as they are mission-critical, correct? Sadly, we know that is not the case. Our custodial teams, food-service workers, and residence-life staff members are routinely at the bottom of the salary scale.

**Trust your in-house experts.** The professionals who interact with students daily will tell you far more than a consulting firm — if you would only listen. As one staff member wrote in the online staff forum, “There is a big gap between who our senior leadership thinks our students are and who our students actually are.” Another professional sadly noted, “We are tired of being infantilized, micromanaged, and treated as disposable.” Stop your “campus listening tours” if you aren’t actually going to listen. Stop asking for feedback if you can’t — or won’t — implement what you hear from your dedicated but dejected staff.

**Acknowledge emotional exhaustion.** This affects everyone but especially staff members who are underrepresented on the campus by virtue of their race, ethnicity, and/or gender. One staff commenter in the forum wrote: “I feel like we have not truly acknowledged the trauma, emotional exhaustion, and despair we have experienced through the compounded crisis of a pandemic, uprising, insurrection, and [Asian-American] hate. I have experienced the past two years with a mix of sadness, anger, and shock, but I don’t even have time to unpack it.”

**Stop normalizing burnout culture.** As one commenter in the online forum eloquently stated: “Doing more with less is not something that should be normalized. Don’t expect a team that was cut in half to do what a full team did.” Another noted, “Our field used to have a ‘busy’ season, but our current workloads now feel like an endless August.” Consider how you praise staff members. Are the people who constantly go above and beyond the only ones who earn your praise? One professional observed, “If you create a work force where martyrdom is praised, you incentivize burnout.”

**Stop exploiting passion.** As one staff member noted, “They call us a ‘family,’ but have no policies, practices, or pay that actually reflect that value.” People fall in love with this work, but passion doesn’t pay their bills. Many people are making heartbreaking decisions to leave their student-affairs “family” because they feel betrayed by the institution. As one such person stated, “The passion has continued to be exploited by the very institutions we served.”

**Make staff retention as important as student retention.** We know student retention is top of mind. What if you took a similar approach to staff retention? You may have read this popular LinkedIn essay on [10 reasons why employees stay](#). It listed factors such as “work has purpose and meaning,” “recognized and respected,” and “trust in leadership.” I asked my webinar participants to rank, on a scale of 1 to 10, their college’s performance on each component and add up the total: The average score was only 39.3 percent! Imagine if student-retention surveys showed your institution was doing only 39 percent of what was required to retain students. There would be no limit to the resources allocated to right that ship, because retention means money. How might your staff members rank how well you are trying to retain them?

**Revamp the hiring process.** As plenty of news coverage and unemployment reports have shown, the job market today [favors candidates](#). The days when higher education could use benefits alone to lure professionals are over. The best people will take their talents to other fields with comparable benefits, higher salaries, and reasonable work weeks. Candidates will no longer tolerate monthslong hiring processes. They won’t even bother to apply if you don’t post the salary range (as colleges routinely fail to do for staff positions). And if you don’t post the salary because it would reduce the size of your applicant pool, perhaps that is an important moment of reflection.

**Stop managing, start leading.** I am under no illusions that any of these suggestions are easy to implement. You have competing interests, budget challenges, and looming enrollment cliffs. But you are a leader. If you make a decision that affects your team, you need to experience it yourself. For example, many residence-life professionals

noted that their senior leaders worked safely from home while staff members were asked to regularly interact on the campus with students who had tested positive. As one forum commenter wrote, “The pandemic has highlighted that we as workers are a commodity for the university.”

To the staff members still working long hours for your college: Thank you. If you don’t hear it directly from students, supervisors, or leaders, know there is a community of people out there cheering you on. Should you decide to leave higher education, you can find work where you will be valued and paid what you are worth. To those who stay, I wish you decreased workloads, reasonable hours, and the opportunity to feel joy again. You are doing tough, important work. Don’t lose yourself in the process.

Any senior leaders reading this far can of course take this advice or leave it. But know that plenty of other employers see the talent that you have left on your teams, and they are willing to pay for it. Can you afford not to change?

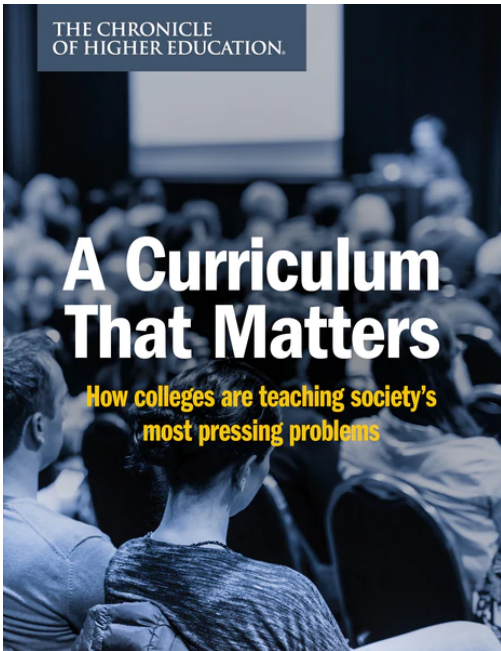
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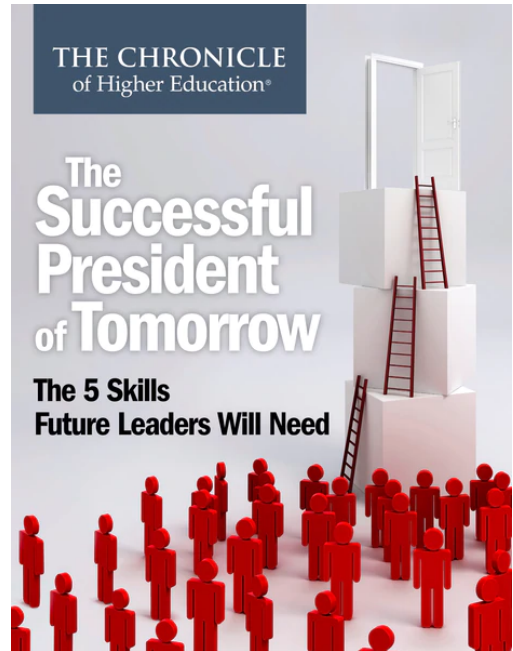
## [Marci K. Walton](#)

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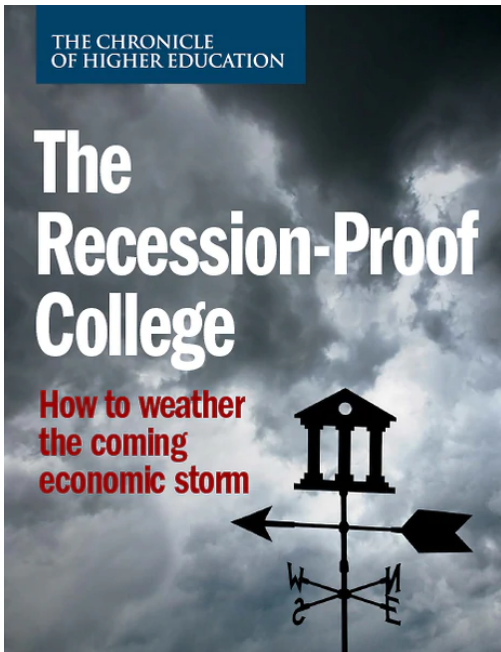
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