

Concerns about staff recruitment and retention
Summary of Faculty Senate sponsored Qualtrics survey
21 January 2022

Over the past few years, senators from the WSU Faculty Senate have described faculty concerns and frustrations when trying to fill positions and retain personnel due to funding shortfalls or presumably due to decisions imposed by HRS and with the recent roll out of Workday. To better understand the scope problems that faculty face, we invited faculty to provide additional information via a Qualtrics survey between December 6th, 2021, and January 7th, 2022.

The survey had two main fields. The first allowed the respondent to answer yes or no to the question, "I have a staff retention/hiring/salary or other concern that I would like to share," to which 85% of 113 respondents indicated 'yes.' The second field was an open narrative that with no specific criteria. At the campus level, responses came from Pullman (50%), Spokane (17.5%), WSU Seattle (10%), WSU Extension/Research Station (8.75%), WSU Vancouver (6.25%), WSU Tri-Cities (3.75%), WSU Everett (1.25%) and other (2.5%).

One consequence of an open response format is that the topic of attention was broadly interpreted and while the majority of narratives focused on staff recruitment and retention, we also received comments about faculty (recruitment, retention, salary compression, salary inversion, promotion, contracts, and discrimination) and other topics that are included in this report.

Disclaimer: The purpose of this report is to summarize the qualitative impressions that were collected from the survey instrument and from additional discussions. This was not a formal survey, and we fully appreciate that there are multiple biases inherent with non-random sampling and a non-structured survey. No attempt was made to formally decompose responses into categorical variables and therefore conclusions should be limited to understanding the scope of issues and concerns that faculty have communicated. This was not a research instrument. The summary statements and paraphrased quotes were assembled by Faculty Senate Chair, Doug Call, but this should also be viewed in the context of the limitations inherent with one person's perspective. The descriptions provided here are informational and they do not represent a formal position statement from the Faculty Senate Executive Committee.

Broad themes

1. HRS is not a team player. Rather than serving the role of facilitator and problem solver, many faculty view this unit as one that advances obstacles and works very slowly to resolve problems. Implementation of Workday has exacerbated an already time consuming and inefficient system.
2. When trying to promote staff or increase salaries, HRS routinely undervalues positions and attempts to force lower pay than is requested. This can be addressed through negotiations with HRS, but this is a time-consuming process that frequently takes months (four or more months was cited more than once) and staff frequently left with better offers before hearing from WSU.
3. Related to #2, it is unclear why HRS interferes with salary levels for AP positions that are funded by grant funds (e.g., federal extramural grants). HRS typically does not understand the responsibilities involved with these positions and/or undervalues these activities relative to the market. Delays caused by this process or outright refusal to allow positions to be funded appropriately are negatively impacting the research enterprise and negatively impacting faculty and staff morale.
4. When HRS intervenes to prevent a suitable salary from being paid and an offer fails, faculty and staff have to invest additional time re-initiating searches, dealing with Workday, and negotiating with HRS. Multiple respondents indicated that they have had to go through this process multiple times to fill a single position, which costs considerable overhead and impacts morale. When staff leave WSU for lack of appropriate pay increases, not only do faculty and staff have to go through the recruitment process one or more times to replace this individual, but the newly hired person still has to be trained. These costs to the institution don't appear to be considered by HRS.
5. There are no clear professional development guidelines or promotion pathways for most staff positions. This contributes to the challenge for getting staff raises approved.
6. Faculty and staff salary levels were repeatedly quoted as being non-competitive and multiple individuals expressed alarm about salary compression, inversion and failure to keep up with inflation, increasing health care costs and increasing taxes. In this context, it is worth noting a newly published salary database (URL below) showing that the average 9-month equivalent salary for WSU faculty is \$91,859 compared to \$121,459 at UW. One could argue that this reflects a geographic difference in living expenses, but it is interesting that HRS does not consider such issues for staff salaries in Seattle (see below).

(https://www.chronicle.com/article/explore-faculty-salaries-at-3-500-colleges-2012-20?utm_source=iterable&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=campaign_3480000_nl_Daily-Briefing_date_20220105&cid=db&source=ams&sourceid=)

Additional observations and quotes from the survey:

- Several individuals described experiences that probably qualify as retaliatory employment practices (usually in the form of lower pay or smaller raises) and potential sexual discrimination, as well as favoritism and nepotism.

- It is unclear why successful and valued staff who should be promoted to elevated positions are required to go through an open search process. Doing so sends the wrong message, lowers morale, increases the likelihood of attrition, and requires a lot of faculty and staff time to deal with the required processes.
- There is a significant mismatch between salaries and cost of living in different geographic locations (e.g., Seattle where one staff member noted that they qualify for low-income housing while working for WSU). It is unclear why this is the case for AP positions, but even UW is able to get around state rules for civil service positions. It is discouraging when UW looks nimbler than WSU...
- With widespread dissatisfaction about salary levels, seeing the salary levels for WSU administrators and athletic staff is demoralizing even if the latter are considered market appropriate. When will market appropriate salaries be prioritized for faculty and staff?
- Several individuals noted that there can be drastically different salaries for tenure track, career track and adjunct faculty.
- There are significant challenges just getting qualified candidates to apply to open positions at WSU. This reflects the current job market to some degree, but WSU generally does not offer competitive salaries.
- If people have to get an external offer to get a pay raise and it takes months to resolve...guess what happens?
- It is not possible for staff to pursue advanced degrees at WSU unless they quit their job. This is a frustrating obstacle to staff advancement.
- Post award services, purchasing and contracts are a disaster and a substantial barrier to the research enterprise.
- The increasing state over-time pay threshold is a looming disaster for fixed research budgets and this will reduce the competitive stature of WSU research programs.
- Several respondents described the challenge with pay where faculty in their units could easily get a pay increase by changing jobs to work for school districts or community colleges.
- Many units are facing retirement cliffs and with the trend of not allowing positions to be replaced, many fear that they will be asked to make up the difference by working more. Invariably, this results in less time for research and scholarship, which means less overhead brought to the college, and some deans will use this as a rationale to continue to deprioritize positions because of the lack of scholarship. This is a death spiral for an academic unit.
- Student medical insurance is insufficient and less comprehensive than what students receive at UW. Why are WSU students treated as second class citizens?
- For career-track faculty, contract renewal notices are frequently last minute with no opportunity for negotiations; positions descriptions often do not reflect actual position responsibilities.
- Some units still fail to disseminate or follow promotion guidelines.
- Deans have interfered with salary requests that are funded by research grants. Why are they interfering with the research enterprise?