

“How Did You Hear That You Might Lose Your Job?”

By Vicki J. Rosser

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The unprecedented and continuing financial challenges confronting higher education radically elevated job security anxieties on many campuses.¹ The University of Illinois, for example, furloughed 11,000 employees in 2010 hoping to save \$17 million in payroll costs.² California State University cut employee pay by ten percent to manage a \$560 million state shortfall.³ Virginia reduced its appropriation to the University of Virginia by 25 percent (\$38.6 million). Since June 2008, Arizona reduced the base state budget of Arizona State University by \$88 million or 18 percent. The university, in turn, initiated the closure of four dozen academic programs and eliminated 550 staff positions. New Jersey cut Rutgers University funding by 15 percent (\$47 million) in FY 2010–11.⁴ Program and department closures, mergers, and restructuring are now standard institutional responses to reduced state appropriations.

Two- and four-year college and university employees bear the brunt of these cutbacks. Local and state governments squeeze their

employees to produce more for less money.⁵ Nor are private colleges exempt. Dedicated, hard-working educational support professionals (ESPs) at all colleges and universities are the most vulnerable employees. They are the first group to face job reassignments, layoffs, or furloughs.⁶

One scholar lists key indicators pointing to the elimination of specific programs and/or departments.⁷ These indicators include mission centrality, program duplication, linkages to other departments, and absence of a strong leader—an external or internal champion to support the eliminated program or department. Units (usually small) serving few students or having many faculty and staff vacancies are also vulnerable. Many institutions facing financial difficulties, this scholar notes, resort to “strategic” program closure. But the cost, quality, and centrality of a program are often not the key determinants of termination.

Departmental and program closures take heavy personal tolls on affected staff and faculty.⁸ This article shares the communication

processes that ESPs experienced when their universities eliminated or merged their units, or reduced or reassigned the staff. The six interviewed ESPs came from two nonunionized public research institutions in a western state. They represented two job classifications—support/service and clerical/secretarial (three from each classification). These classifications showed more staff reductions nationally than other ESP categories since 2008: -3.2 percent or 24,310 positions and -6.1 percent or 27,655 positions, respectively.⁹ The clerical/secretarial category showed a cumulative decrease of 2.6 percent (14,481 positions) over a 16-year period.¹⁰

The six ESPs came from an initial group of 12. The other six ESPs declined to be interviewed for fear of reprisals against them or their new work unit by senior administration. Put plainly, they were afraid to lose their jobs. The six ESPs who agreed to interviews included four women and two men; two interviewees came from ethnic minority groups. All six had been reassigned to another department and/or work unit within their campuses.

The interviews focused on three primary questions:

1. How did you hear that the administration had targeted your work unit for staff reduction, merger, or elimination?
2. Who told you about your reassignment?
3. Describe the reassignment and placement process.

HOW DID YOU HEAR YOUR UNIT WAS TARGETED?

Staff members reported expressions of surprise, anger, anxiety, and betrayal when told of the fate of their units. All six ESPs said they heard about a unit review or a possible elimination, merger, or restructuring from someone other than their immediate supervisor. Some interviewees heard the news from unofficial sources or from the rumor mill. Other ESPs said their supervisors reported hearing nothing official until they saw published “hit lists” of units considered for elimination by the administration.

“I heard from my unit supervisor we were under a microscope and being considered for cutbacks,” said one ESP, “but no other information was available, and it’s unofficial right now.” “Being in a public institution was a problem for personal communication,” said another ESP who summarized the feelings of all the respondents. “Public means everything is public, whether it is official or unofficial as rumors, it’s all public...everyone knows and it’s all very painful.”

Responses regarding communication reflected a high level of emotional sensitivity. “Do you know how hurt I was to hear from someone other than my boss?” asked one ESP. Other ESPs expressed similar feelings, “I didn’t know whether to be angry or cry...yes mostly crying, or feel betrayed...I was pretty darn loyal to this place, and then they go and treat me like a piece of dirt.”

“I was aware we were under review, but I was in denial,” said an ESP. “I tried not to worry until I heard the official word from my boss, and when the word came down from above, I cried. I loved my work unit, but the president didn’t, so that’s that.” “My neighbor heard the same time I heard I was going to be eliminated...tell me how you would feel about that?”

“My unit was on the list, then off the list, then on the list again,” another respondent noted. The administration showed “absolutely no respect for our feelings.... We were riding an emotional roller coaster.”

One ESP paused for a moment, “I have been here a lot longer than those making the decisions...they [administrators] always come and go, some do good things and others destroy the place, but I will continue to be here...I can’t afford to leave.”

WHO TOLD YOU ABOUT THE REASSIGNMENT?

The second question focused on reassignments: “Who informed you were to be reassigned or placed in another unit?” One ESP answered, “HR talked with many of us in the targeted

areas. Thank God. I have so many financial commitments, I just didn't know what I was going to do...I was appreciative that I actually had a job...and I didn't care where I went.”

“When my unit became official...months later after all the emotional pain and anxiety, HR came and talked with us about our options,” said another ESP. “They were very nice, but all this was too long and hurtful.” “HR came to talk to us,” another interviewee stated, “but they also gave out cards to seek help through the employee assistance program. The university attorney was in the room...they seemed nice and respectful, but we [the staff] were all so scared and angry.”

“When it all became official, my boss came into my office and we both cried. I knew my boss had no control over the situation, and we had such turnover in bosses the past few years. But at least my boss went out of the way to be supportive and help get the word out across the institution that I was a good worker.... Then I had to go and meet with HR.” “HR talked to me,” this ESP added. “They also had cutbacks, I heard.”

THE REASSIGNMENT PROCESS

The third question examined the opportunities available to these professional staff members for job and work reassignments. The university reassured most staff members that it would help them find a comparable position on campus where openings currently existed. The goal was to find a position before the bumping policy kicked in and affected another ESP.

This policy made many respondents feel uncomfortable. “How would you like it,” said one ESP, “if you bumped someone out of a position, and everyone in the unit loved that person? Then you come along to replace the person...I prayed something would open up naturally rather than having to bump someone.”

“Personally, I want to make it harder for them,” another staff member stated, “This way they have to find me something, at least for now.... But I also can't be too picky where I go.”

“I interviewed a couple of times,” added this interviewee. “But I also knew from the campus grapevine some of these areas have high turnover because the boss or the employees in the units were unbearable...I need a job, so what else can I do for now?”

This ESP had left the institution by the time of the interview. “The situation was causing all sorts of stress on myself and my family.... They were all so unsympathetic...high paying guys with no feelings....” “They talk a good game but ran away from people when they were approached with the hard questions.... They forget people are behind the numbers.”

“I love my work, I love the school, and I love to work with students,” one ESP simply said, “That's all that matters to me, although I'm not sure they [the senior administrators] get it about our students.... I felt they didn't care or they wouldn't have made such decisions that hurt them in such a way.”

CONCLUSION

ESPs and scholars share similar insights. Almost all the ESPs reported high turnover, weak and inexperienced leadership, and many vacant positions in their targeted units. No managers defended their units, internally or externally—a failure that surprised and deeply hurt these ESPs. The emotional toll from program reductions, eliminations, and mergers on these ESPs will take a long time to heal.

Program and unit closures—ESPs and scholars agree—will produce lasting negative fallout. But despite the damage, they remained committed to working hard, and remaining loyal and dedicated to the individuals they serve—students, faculty, work unit administrators, and external stakeholders.

NOTES

¹ “13 Reasons...,” 2009, A1.

² “Furlough Announcement,” 2010, 1.

³ Fontana, 2010.

⁴ Sidarous, 2011.

⁵ Rosser, 2010; 2011.

⁶ Greenhouse, 2010.

⁷ Eckel, 2003.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Rosser, 2011. The three other ESP categories are technical/paraprofessionals, skilled/crafts, and services/maintenance.

¹⁰ Ibid.

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