

Support Professionals: The Key Issues Survey

By Vicki J. Rosser

Vicki J. Rosser is associate professor of higher education in the Department of Educational Leadership, College of Education, University of Nevada, Las Vegas. She is the higher education program director and is co-director for the University Council for Educational Administration's Center on Academic Leadership. A member of the board of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, Rosser reviews manuscripts for more than ten refereed journals and serves as a consulting editor for Research in Higher Education. She writes extensively on the worklives, morale, satisfaction, and mobility of U.S. administrative staff and faculty members.

Academic (noninstructional) professionals (APs) and education support professionals (ESPs) are vital to the success of the U.S. academic enterprise. American colleges and universities employed over 3.5 million workers in 2005.¹ But only 42 percent of these employees were faculty members or instruction/research staff. The other 58 percent were APs and ESPs.² This employee category shows substantial growth: only 48 percent of campus employees were APs and ESPs in 1993.³

Research shows that salary and benefits, job recognition and protection, and interpersonal relations affect key aspects of the worklives of support professionals, including their job satisfaction, morale, and their intention to stay or leave.⁴ This article illuminates the work-related issues most important to members of ESP bargaining units.

THE SURVEY

The survey sample included 20 union representatives, selected to represent employees across ten states⁵ and several unions.⁶ The sample included 11 members from four-year colleges, and nine respondents from two-year institutions.⁷ A phone call alerted union staff members to a forthcoming e-mail query. The follow-up e-mail asked the union staff members to answer or discuss the questions via e-mail or telephone, or to decline to take part. Participants could refuse to answer specific questions; they received complete anonymity and could withdraw from the study at any time. But the interviewees participated enthusiastically, and often asked me to confirm their statements by soliciting the comments of their colleagues.

The survey asked respondents to list the five issues most important to members of

their bargaining unit, and to state whether the most recent collective bargaining negotiations addressed these issues. Members offering affirmative responses were then asked to state the outcome of the negotiations.

IMPORTANT WORK ISSUES

Confirming previous research, the most important concerns voiced by union representatives involved salary and benefits, job recognition and protection, and interpersonal relations. But respondents offered a hierarchy of issues within each category, while noting that other subjects may assume critical importance during local organizing efforts.

Salary and Benefits

Union staff members give highest priority to obtaining a fair living wage for their members, supplemented by a comprehensive wellness or health care package. These representatives listed eight issues within this category: salary, cost of living increases, and merit pay; federal grant pay; health care coverage and costs; sick and personal leave; vacation time; retirement; tuition fee remission; and parking costs.

Salaries and benefits, the representatives noted, needed to keep pace with increases in the cost of goods and services. “Salary plays out in three different ways,” one staff member stated, “parity, equity, and longevity.” Members want to earn a fair and equitable living wage that rewards their loyalty, service, and tenure.

Other salary-related issues included merit pay initiatives; within-position classification pay increases, especially when managers add duties and when employees perform superior work; comparable institutional and state salary classifications to ensure equity; and relief to individuals hired on federal grants and contracts who received no pay increases over several years.

Respondents stressed the importance of medical, dental, and vision coverage. Noting the continued rise in the employee’s share of health care costs,⁸ they reported prices ranging

from full-paid coverage by the employer to a 75–25 percent split between the employee and employer. “Unbelievably this continues to be an area of growing concern,” one member noted, “and it is often a challenge between union staff members and academic administrators.” The uncertainties of retiring on a fixed annual income can increase when support professionals lack medical insurance. Annual limits on sick and personal leave and on vacation time accruals reflect similar member uncertainties.

Tuition remission policies allow ESPs to pursue skills training and professional development opportunities. These opportunities, in turn, build their functional experience and thus enhance workforce quality.⁹ Reported tuition remissions range from minimal to substantial. Contract language for some community college units allows members to obtain a baccalaureate degree at a neighboring four-year institution. Other contracts permit members to transfer their tuition remission benefit to a spouse or dependent.

No respondent reported discounts or remissions for parking fees, but the rising cost of employee parking remains a negotiable concern—especially for members with little or no access to public transportation. “Often the person who parks next to the classified staff member makes twice the salary,” observed one union member.

Salary and benefits-related issues attend to the personal needs of support and administrative professionals, while respondents’ discussion of job recognition and protection suggests ways of improving their worklives.

Job Recognition and Protection

Respondents gave near-equal importance to job recognition and protection and to salary and benefits. Members raised 11 worklife-related issues: job descriptions and classifications, performance evaluations, grievance processes, promotional opportunities, selection and mobility, protection of assignment, part-time and contingent labor, outsourcing,

hours worked and overtime, lay-off notices, and contract language improvements.

Staff members, respondents asserted, must be consulted when their job descriptions or position requirements change or are reclassified.¹⁰ Managers, respondents added, should use performance evaluations as helpful, guiding tools to support and motivate member performance. But, one respondent states, “a performance evaluation is the most grieved area by our members, and sadly is often used as a ‘gotcha’ tool.” Respondents also felt that grievance processes must promote a positive work environment for the employee and the employer.

Promotion opportunities increase job satisfaction and morale among support professionals. Union staff members continually call upon senior administrators to give internal candidates a “first crack” at vacant positions. Support professional members, whether seeking lateral moves or promotions, want a transparent and fair selection process.

Three issues tend to overlap: part-time and contingent labor, outsourcing, and protecting assignments including vacancies and transfers. Union staff members report concern with the growing employment of part-time and contingent labor on campus. Administrators often use graduate students to fill open positions, or outsource the jobs. “The goals are two-fold,” a respondent notes, “protect the job or assignment of these vacant positions, and organize part-time and/or contingent labor.”

Other salient job protection-related issues include hours worked and overtime, lay-off notices, and contract language improvements. One contentious example of an hours worked issue: the tendency for managers to re-post a vacant position as part-time, when it still requires full-time work. Another significant concern: the calculation and payment of overtime, such as asking members to take time off in lieu of earned overtime pay. Support professional positions are often the first targeted area in fiscally tough times. Abrupt lay-off notices,

a frequent occurrence, limit members’ ability to prepare themselves and their families for the resulting economic hardship.

The use of specific words in contracts and their application are critical to job protection. “Just changing simple words from ‘may’ to ‘shall,’” stated a staff member, “can have a profound and positive effect on the rights of our members.”

Employers can improve the quality of work for support professionals by strengthening job recognition and protection, respondents conclude. The goals of the college, they add, become less attainable without positive interpersonal relations between members and management.

Interpersonal Relations

More than any other area, the quality of interpersonal relationships with supervisors, faculty members, and senior administrators profoundly affects the job satisfaction and morale of support professionals.¹¹ “Interpersonal concerns can critically impact workers’ job satisfaction, productivity, and morale,” a staff member commented. But “they are often the most difficult to negotiate for within the bargaining process... these issues are much harder to prove.” Union staff members listed these interpersonal experiences as matters of concern: second class citizen, respect from administration and faculty, communication and inclusion, supervisory relations, and leadership skills training.

Respondents saw second-class citizenship, with little or no respect from supervisors, senior administrators, or the faculty, as a disturbing trend. Especially troublesome: a lack of communication and little to no inclusion or consultation regarding policy changes. “They want us to implement the policy, but we have absolutely no say in the development or design of that policy,” a staff member noted. “Often we are told to just work out the details and get it done...now.” Many first-line supervisors, union staff members added, need leadership training that includes interpersonal relations, workload motivation, and strategies for respectfully

delegating tasks and responsibilities to members. Respondents frequently mentioned the terms “bullying” and “hostile work environment” when describing supervisors who lacked leadership skills training and were unable to work with employees effectively.

STATUS OF NEGOTIATED ISSUES

The survey next asked union staff members to list the issues discussed during the most recent collective bargaining negotiations, and to state the outcome of negotiations on each important issue. Issues and priorities differed by local unit membership needs; few issues were equally salient in all instances. Most union staff representatives brought the entire range of issues to the bargaining table. But, they added, shifting priorities in these fiscally austere times influenced the extent to which they negotiated a specific issue. The primary goal, respondents reiterated, is protecting the salaries, benefits, and job security of support professionals. All interviewed staff members expressed satisfaction with the salaries and benefits they negotiated for their members.

Additional areas in which the staff negotiated positively or made substantial inroads included: tuition fee remission issues; job descriptions and performance evaluations; grievance processes; promotion opportunities, transparent hiring practices, and mobility; protection of assignment; part-time and contingent labor; outsourcing; hours worked and overtime; lay-offs; and contract language. Goals in other areas were not fully realized, respondents noted. These areas included parking costs, job classification, just cause language, second-class citizenry, respect from the administration and faculty, communication and inclusion, and supervisory skills relations and training. But, bringing these unresolved issues to the table on behalf of their members was itself productive, survey respondents maintained.

CONCLUSION

Union staff members listed salary and benefits, job recognition and protection, and interpersonal relations as the most important work areas. But specific issues within each area are critically important to professional staff members. Union representation provides clarity to their priorities. “There is nothing more important than negotiating a fair and equitable living wage that rewards longevity and loyalty of our members,” stated one staff member. “That also includes a strong benefits package.” Respondents also reported continued concern with issues related to vacation, sick, and personal leave time, and to the calculation of these accruals.

The second major area: recognition and protection of the work of professional staff members, including respectful communication and discussion of member job descriptions and position classifications. Also critical: transparent hiring practices, fair performance appraisals, and opportunities for promotion and mobility within the college. The priority list also includes protecting vacant positions by monitoring part-time and contingent labor levels, and minimizing or eliminating position outsourcing.

Treating professional staff members with respect includes staff involvement in policy decisions directly affecting their work. Supervisors must ensure fair and equitable treatment of their professional staff, and staff members should accept nothing less.

NOTES

Thanks to the union staff and their members who willingly gave their valuable time to help make this article informative and for their service in guiding their peers across the country.

¹ U.S. Department of Education, 2008.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.; U.S. Department of Education, 1996.

⁴ Johnsrud and Rosser, 1999a, 1999b; Johnsrud, Heck, and Rosser, 2000; Rosser, 2004; Rosser, Hermsen, Mamiseishvili, and Wood, 2007.

⁵ Florida, Illinois, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, Montana, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and Rhode Island.

⁶ NEA, AFT, SEIU, and independents.

⁷ The responsibilities of five members extended over both types of colleges. We categorized these members by their primary responsibilities.

⁸ Rosser, 2007; Heron and Donatelli, 2003.

⁹ Rosser, 2006.

¹⁰ Rosser, 2008.

¹¹ Rosser, 2004.

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