Higher Education Workforce Challenges and Opportunities

Framing Where We Are Now, Identifying the Challenges Shaping the Higher Education Workforce, and Charting Our Path Forward

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A year like no other for our world and for higher education will be followed by a year of transitions and additional decision-making for higher education leaders, and almost all of these decisions will impact the faculty and staff who create the culture and drive the performance of our institutions. Our employees have been through a lot. Our next work must clearly acknowledge their great contributions and the importance we place on them not just as our employees, but as colleagues who are balancing multiple personal priorities and challenges that go far beyond their work responsibilities.

Returning to "business as usual" is not the strategy that will help us recruit, retain, and engage talented colleagues who could quickly be whisked away by the corporate sector, another college or university, or other local employers that adopt more forward-thinking approaches to work and commitment to their employees. This paper will highlight the current challenges facing higher education, some of the specific workforce challenges for colleges and universities, emerging workforce trends for employers across the country, and examples of best practices emerging at higher education institutions. We will conclude with recommendations to help higher education leaders better position their institutions to survive and thrive as employers of choice in an already competitive environment.

Current Challenges for Higher Education

We start by highlighting current challenges for higher education. This list, while not exhaustive, is a summary of some of the most pressing challenges impacting higher education and higher education employees.

Uneven Impact for Institutions

Higher education institutions have not been evenly impacted by COVID-19 and will not be evenly impacted in the future. Some institutions were able to continue the work and pay of employees with minimal layoffs and position cuts during the crisis, while others were forced to lay off thousands and cut hundreds of faculty and staff jobs. Leaders are gradually returning some laid-off workers to their jobs, but we will not know the full extent of the initial impact until the fall, or maybe even the spring. As noted in a recent

article from *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, never before has higher education shed so many employees at such a rate.

The 2025 enrollment cliff did not go away. The enrollment cliff is not currently grabbing the headlines it did in 2019, but the number of traditional students approaching college age is continuing to decline. Many colleges and universities were experiencing declines before COVID-19 and continued to experience declines during the 2020-21 academic year. In addition, community colleges, which traditionally see an increase in the number of students during periods of higher unemployment, have (overall) not experienced increases, with many instead experiencing declines. Will institutions that experienced enrollment declines during the pandemic bounce back or attract new students? Student enrollment decline will continue to impact employment of faculty and staff.

Uneven Impact for Employees

Employees have also experienced an uneven impact. According to a February 2021 *Fortune* article, almost 3 million women, especially women of color, have been forced to leave their jobs due to challenges created by childcare responsibilities. As noted in a March 2021 article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, journal submissions by women faculty have decreased, and mothers with younger children have significantly reduced their working hours compared to their male counterparts. The *Chronicle* article also notes that available research on pandemic impacts typically references heterosexual couples and fails to include other family units, such as same-sex couples and single parents.

There has also been an uneven impact by employee type, with lowest-paid employees most often being impacted by layoffs, furloughs, and position reductions.

Race Relations and Equity Challenges

The race relations and equity and inclusion challenges faced by our nation and our colleges and universities have also not disappeared. Students, faculty, and staff are looking to higher education leaders to do more than write letters expressing outrage at the senseless murders and acts of violence against people of color and members of the LGBTQ community Some campus leaders have moved talk to action, but many have not done so. A focus on meaningful action and intentional change to the culture of our campus communities—for students, faculty, and staff—must be a top priority for the fall semester and into the future. This commitment to equity must also extend to pay and representation of women and people of color in faculty and staff positions across campus.

Student and Employee Mental Health and Well-Being

Student and employee mental health and well-being have been significantly impacted by challenges associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. As noted in a February survey of presidents by the American Council on Education, student and employee mental health and well-being are top-of-mind challenges for our presidents and our institutions. These challenges will not just disappear as we move beyond the pandemic.

We must augment the resources available to support our employees as they work through an increasingly complex and challenging world. CUPA-HR has created a number of resources to help higher education leaders address these challenges, including a podcast series and Knowledge Center resources, model policies, and programs created or curated for higher education.

Current Higher Education Workforce Challenges

In addition to the overall challenges for our institutions, there are recruitment and retention challenges that must be acknowledged and addressed.

Attracting Talent

The days of posting an ad in a higher education publication or on a local website and being flooded with applicants are over for any moderately competitive positions, and attracting talent is no longer limited to positions with much-sought-after technical skills. We must also be willing to increase the hourly wages of our lowest-paid positions to have any hope of recruiting employees who perform the vitally important service and maintenance roles on campus. CUPA-HR published a research brief focused on minimum wage in March 2021. We must fully engage in our efforts to pay competitive wages and to market (what should be) the welcoming, inclusive environment of our campus community.

In addition, we can no longer assume that the U.S. workforce considers higher education to be a great place to work. During the fall of 2020, a consultant conducted a study for CUPA-HR and identified that most under-25-year-olds have poor perceptions of higher education culture and compensation. The consultant also found that 70% of Black Americans and 60% of LGBTQ Americans do not perceive higher education as a comfortable place to work. NOTE: Black Americans had similar perceptions of other types of employers (e.g., public sector, banking, tech sector) indicating a wider systemic issue.

Retaining Talent

According to a January 2021 Inside Higher Ed article, burnout was causing high attrition of higher ed employees even before COVID-19. CUPA-HR higher education workforce studies also indicate high turnover this year for a number of positions, including chief diversity officer, Title IX investigator, academic advisor, student financial aid counselor, student counselor, HR coordinator, advancement specialist, and medical assistant with median years in these positions of three years or less. A 2019 CUPA-HR research report also highlights the challenges of an aging higher education workforce, and a 2021 CUPA-HR research report highlights that our skilled trades workforce is aging and that the pipeline to replace these incumbents is almost non-existent.

As we determine our workforce strategy for fall 2021 and beyond, we must be willing to rethink and redefine our recruitment and retention efforts. The next section outlines some emerging workforce trends that should be considered as we compete with the private sector.

Emerging Workforce Trends

According to a [2021 report](#) from the Conference Board, corporate CEOs are acknowledging that recruiting, engaging, and retaining talented employees is core to their business strategy. U.S. CEOs also noted that the COVID-19 crisis has helped identify opportunities for change, flexibility, collaboration, and better use of technology. The report also highlights that the pre-pandemic model with 5-7% of employees working remotely will change to 20-40% post pandemic. Work from home opportunities during the last year have forced higher education to catch up to the corporate world in many aspects, including increased flexibility, better and more creative use of technology, and enhanced agility regarding decision-making and responsiveness to the changing world around us. In addition, the pandemic reminded us of just [how interconnected our work and lives are](#). Will higher education leaders be willing to incorporate similar flexibility and agility in a post-COVID work environment?

Campus leaders across the country are announcing return dates for employees who have not already returned to campus and planning for a "return to normal operations" in the fall. Although we are grateful that we can return to normal or close-to-normal operations, we must plan and proceed with caution. All higher education leaders and employees have experienced a year like no other. Employees are tired, and some have hung on to help their institutions make it through the year. Others have been able to hang on because of the flexibility that has been incorporated into their work schedules and responsibilities, and some who were laid off have found other jobs, creating additional recruitment challenges.

Big tech and other large companies are already leading the way regarding work-from-home and hybrid work opportunities and will continue to leverage this to attract and retain talent. For colleges and universities to be able recruit, retain, and be competitive, we must incorporate some of our successes from the last year into our approaches to work moving forward.

> **Flexibility, including redefinition of hours worked, and how and where work is performed, must be incorporated into our culture.** Employees largely prefer a more flexible work environment. According to a 2021 [PricewaterhouseCoopers report](#), only 22% want to return to the office full time, and 74% want to work remotely 2+ days per week. It is also important to note that employees with fewer years of experience would rather be in the office. A one-size-fits-all approach is not the strategy that should be used for higher education.
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> As part of our deliberation, we should also evaluate the impact of our decisions on employees, including commute time, cost of transportation or parking, and the impact on employers regarding cost of workspace, utilities, etc. Employers who intentionally incorporate some level of flexibility will be the employers who more competitively recruit and retain employees at all levels of the organization. The private sector is embracing remote and hybrid work as part of its strategy. We must also do so.
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> **Executive leader perspectives regarding work productivity are not shared by employees.** In addition to overall workforce challenges, there is a disconnect between executives and employees regarding productivity and connection to a place-bound

workspace. According to a 2021 [PricewaterhouseCoopers report](#), 65% of executives believe that productivity is tied to being in the office. For employers, office space increases productivity, provides space to meet with clients, enables effective collaboration, and helps create and sustain company culture. For employees, increased productivity is not tied to the office. Instead, the physical office space is for collaborating, accessing equipment and documents, meetings, and training and development. This leads to the opportunity to reconsider what work needs to be accomplished in an office space.

Our approach to work must also acknowledge that uncertainty will continue. Even as a vaccine is being administered across the country, COVID-19 could be with us for many years to come.

Emerging Promising Practices for Higher Education Employers

The pandemic forced higher education human resource leaders to shift quickly when decisions were made to transition to virtual learning and drastically reduce all on campus activities. However, with this shift came a multitude of challenges to ensure that the mission of the college or university stayed on track and that members of the campus community stayed connected and healthy.

The Shift to Remote
Many higher education institutions either did not have remote work policies in place or found that existing policies were inadequate. This created the urgent need to quickly adapt and create policies. While these new work arrangements were thought to be temporary in nature, new policies have been tweaked and updated, and have proven successful over the course of the year. In April 2020, a staff member at Princeton University shared that the pandemic proved that higher ed can move quickly, as a remote work policy that would normally have taken months to approve was passed in a matter of hours. At the University of Illinois System, within a week, everyone had been transitioned to work from home, which included proper equipment, telecommuting policies, and appropriate approvals.

Retooling Skills
While many faculty and staff were able to easily transition from in-person to virtual work, the work of many positions needed to be performed on site. This required the quick creation of safety protocols and procedures to keep these team members safe. It also meant, in some cases, that new skill sets had to be developed. At the University of Richmond, a program called Cross U was developed to enable dining service employees to learn new skills and work in facilities department roles during times when students were not on campus. Like many universities, Elon University had to provide training to physical plant staff to learn new sanitizing techniques, such as room fogging. The University of Illinois created the Shield Illinois Saliva Test, which is a fast, low-cost test for COVID-19. This required the human resources team to swiftly set up hiring for labs and testing sites across the state.

Campus Culture and Connectivity

Although many new technologies were put in place to keep teams, students, and campus members connected, institutions had to rethink many in-person processes and activities. North Carolina State University had been conducting face-to-face onboarding for new hires multiple times per month. This included time with various members of the HR team, a campus tour, and other team-building activities. All of this had to be restructured and shifted to a virtual environment, which has resulted in several improved practices. Further, I-9 Employment Eligibility Verification is an in-person process to verify identity and the legal authorization to work. While U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services (USCIS) worked to create more flexible processing procedures, NC State had to determine how to safely reauthorize new hires in person. This resulted in a three-day drive-through, where over 2,000 I-9s were processed.

Well-Being

The events of the past year have brought more than one pandemic to the forefront. While well-being has been a challenge in our country for quite some time, it quickly garnered the attention of campus leadership as students, faculty, and staff were confronted with multiple new challenges in this environment. Many universities saw a dramatic increase in their Employee Assistance Program (EAP) usage, requiring the addition of services and contracting for new services. In some cases, institutions brought new full-time counselors on staff. In addition, several innovative programs have been implemented. At Brown University, alternative work assignments and schedules were created to assist employees. The institution has also expanded back-up childcare and eldercare options. At Elon University, leaders collaborated with the YMCA to create a virtual learning academy to assist employees with dependents in grades K-6. Monmouth University shifted its annual "de-stress" day to a weeklong event that included sessions such as mindfulness and yoga.

These are just a few of the examples that illustrate the quick, creative, and thoughtful approaches taken by our higher education colleagues across the country.

Recommendations to Make Colleges and Universities Employers of Choice

Uneven impact for institutions and employees, race relations and equity challenges, student and employee mental health and well-being, and attracting and retaining talent must all be considered as we strive to create and sustain a collaborative and welcoming campus community that helps attract and retain students. Following are some recommendations to help institution leaders ensure that their institutions are considered to be employers of choice in this increasingly competitive landscape:

- Work and life are connected. Where have you already incorporated flexibility? How can this be incorporated into the future?

- What are ways you can emphasize that you are focused on employee productivity instead of the typical 8-5, Monday-Friday mentality?

- How can you engage in a process that determines whether all or parts of jobs can be performed remotely, hybrid (some in and out of the office), and fully on site?

- Childcare will continue to be a concern, particularly if schools continue to incorporate forms of remote classroom instruction. How will working parents know that they have your support? Eldercare is also a growing concern. How will you support your employees who also have caregiver or oversight responsibilities for aging parents?

- Women have been adversely impacted during the COVID-19 crisis due to childcare and other responsibilities. How do you make sure that you are asking questions of the women in your workforce to fully understand and address their challenges and needs? How are you ensuring that your policies, practices, and language also extend the same family flexibility and expectations to men?

- Our work must incorporate a genuine commitment to creating an inclusive campus culture. What work is already occurring, and what must be incorporated? CUPA-HR has moved talk to action by launching a series of [21-day equity habit-building challenges](#) and creating and curating [other resources](#) to help campus leaders, including a higher education-focused Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Index.

- Significant changes were made to the use of technology during the past year. How do you continue to leverage and build upon these to enhance productivity and create flexibility for your employees?

- There are real cost savings in building operations if we are willing and able to adjust where and how work is performed. What adjustments have been made? What additional adjustments can be made? How can these adjustments benefit your students?

- Employees are tired, and some have hung on to help their institutions make it through the year. Others have been able to hang on because of the flexibility that has been incorporated into their work schedules and responsibilities. Are your employee mental health resources adequate? How have you made adjustments to augment benefits during the pandemic? How can you acknowledge and reward this commitment to keep talented, engaged employees at all levels of the organization?

This list of recommendations is just a starting point for action. Every campus is different, and every plan must incorporate and emphasize the specific needs of the particular campus community. A year like no other for our world and for higher education must be followed by a year filled with clear actions that emphasize our commitment to building an even stronger institution and our commitment to our faculty and staff. They have been through a lot. Our next work must clearly acknowledge their great contributions and the importance we place on them not just as our employees, but as colleagues who are balancing multiple personal priorities and challenges that go far beyond their work responsibilities.