Why Yoga Won’t Fix Our Burnout Problem: A Higher Education Student Affairs Case Study

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Problem
This study explores social connection in the workplace and its effect on feelings of burnout.
Employee burnout and high turnover in higher education student affairs staff is not a new trend. This modern epidemic, accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, has left many student affairs professionals overworked, burned out, and isolated.

I conducted a case study of student affairs staff in student-helping roles at one university in the southwest region of the United States.

Research Questions
1. What is the relationship, if any, between social connection in the workplace and feelings of employee burnout?
2. How does a remote work environment affect feelings of social connection in the workplace?

What is burnout?
The World Health Organization (WHO) classifies burnout as an “occupational phenomenon resulting from unsuccessfully managed chronic workplace stress.”

Mixed Methods Approach
Qualitative Interviews (10 key informants)
• Connection
• Community
• Burnout/Emotional exhaustion
• Culture
• Remote/ Hybrid work

Quantitative Survey (62% response rate – 51 participants)
• Social connection in the workplace
• Workplace friendships scale
• Workplace integration scale
• Feelings of burnout (Maslach Burnout Inventory)

Secondary Data
• Employee satisfaction survey
• Employee turnover rates

Results

Qualitative Interview Themes & Analysis
• 100% responded that community in the workplace is important, extremely important, and/or vital.
• 100% stated their workplace friendships reduced their emotional exhaustion due to work.
• 78% felt less connected to their direct teams when working remotely.

*These responses were consistent with Social Baseline Theory in that having others help work feel less exhausting as human brains use others as resources for load sharing (Beckes & Sbarra, 2022).

Quantitative Survey Results & Analysis
• 68.6% scored medium to high emotional exhaustion.
• 59% spent half to all or nearly all time working alone.
• Respondents reported the more time they spent working alone, the fewer workplace friendships they had.

Hypothesis 1: As social connection in the workplace increases, feelings of employee burnout decreases.
Hypothesis 2: As time spent working remotely increases, feelings of social connection in the workplace decreases.

Outcome: The quantitative findings showed no statistically significant relationship between the variables; therefore, neither hypothesis was proven.

*These quantitative findings were contradicted by the qualitative data, so additional research is needed.

Key Literature Cited


Conclusions
• Student affairs staff at the case study site are experiencing feelings of burnout, particularly the emotional exhaustion dimension.
• Participants have felt less connected to their teams and student affairs when working remotely.
• Many participants are spending more than half to nearly all their time working alone (without colleagues).
• Community is vital to student affairs professionals.

Proposed Solutions
• More research needs to be completed on social isolation and loneliness specific to the workplace because both conditions negatively impact overall health.
• Leadership should create intentional time and space for staff to connect with their colleagues to build community.
• To create a learning culture, leadership needs to facilitate long-term cultural change based on what staff value to flourish in the work environment.
• Student affairs and other organizations can improve the overall staff experience by prioritizing staff’s needs.

Further Reflections
Addressing burnout is not only essential to employee well-being but to student success. As McClure notes, “Student success is inextricably linked to staff and faculty working conditions. You don’t get the former without investing in the latter” (McClure, 2021).

Therefore, leaders must acknowledge burnout is an organizational issue; it is important; and they are ready to listen and act on what staff need and not only recommend more self-care or burnout will persist.

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