

Staff Economic Climate Survey 2009

In March 2009, Staff Council conducted a brief survey to solicit staff opinions, concerns, and understandings. A set of thirteen questions were asked, focusing on staff employment at Colorado College. The purpose of these questions was to determine what sacrifices staff could reasonably accept as an alternative to forced layoffs. No questions were asked about programs or other groups on campus. The *ad hoc* Budget Planning Team is charged with program review, and faculty has the Faculty Executive Committee to address their concerns.

The survey had a 52% response rate, with 293 staff members completing the survey. The survey was closed on April 3rd. Note: the percentages provided incorporate answers from the open text comment box.

Responses

Staff is willing to make significant concessions and sacrifices to retain jobs. “I would gladly reduce hours to retain all of our colleagues” was a sentiment shared by many. A collective sacrifice was also popular among staff, not requiring one group or another to shoulder more of the burden. These ideas came up again and again in the comments sections.

For many staff their top choices would be to freeze their salaries (33%); moreover, another 28% would supplement that choice by forgoing a cost of living increase; 62% staff in total for these sort of option. Stopping contributions to retirement funds received 10% of the votes. Reducing hours along with reduced pay was selected by 11%. Working the same amount while taking a pay cut was favored by 4%. In the write-in section 9% stated they would be willing to do a combination of the options. Paired with that thought were frequent comments about equity regardless of the outcome: “Whatever happens to staff should happen to administrators and faculty.”

The majority of staff (72%) is willing to alter their schedules and compensation for up to three years to parallel the budget constraints set by the Board of Trustees, 9% were willing to extend these conditions, and 2% would make the changes permanent. From the written comments, 6% thought 3 years was too long a planning timeframe. These comments were coupled with a need to review the impact of changes, slowing down the process. “On an annual basis with the decision reviewed each year” was the gist of many comments. Only 3% stated they were unwilling or unable to accommodate any changes. The budget savings from compensation would be preferentially directed to the staff salary pool, followed by operations budget, financial aid, and capital expenses (second, third, and fourth preference, respectively). Whatever the college administration deems best was their fifth choice. Reason for that surfaced in comments about a lack of trust in protecting staff, equity concerns and one request for a review process to help us move forward into the future. “Saving jobs is my #1.”

Staff vary as a group on how best they could personally absorb reductions, 23% said from financial compensations (such as earnings and salary freezes), 27% from decreasing or stopping college contributions to their retirement, and 30% through furloughs and decreases in hours worked. Only 9% thought non-salaried benefits were their best choice. One surveyed asked “is there any way to “personalize” this?” Written

comments again suggested a combination of these options was favorable to 9% of staff and 1% indicated they could not afford a reduction of any sort. “A combination of salary and benefit reductions (sic) would spread out the financial burden.”

Staff strongly supported a tiered approach to pay cuts, which is currently happening at higher educational institutions (e.g., Middlebury). 74% agreed or strongly agreed with the idea, while only 14% disagreed or strongly disagreed; this last percent was not far off from those who were neutral about the idea, 12%.

When asked directly about altering work hours, 54% said they could not as a first choice. Second choices at 31% agreement each, were decreasing hours over the course of the entire year and decreasing with specified times off such as summer, winter and spring breaks, etc. These results were close to the next choice of working the school year and off in the summer. Clear final choices were decreasing significant numbers of hours to the bare minimum (37%), while 73% did not want to go less than the amount needed to be eligible for benefits. In the comments section, 41 employees (17%) indicated that they were unable or unwilling to reduce hours: “I already work reduced hours in the summer time, if my hours go any lower ... I will have to get a second job.” Many staff questioned how reduced hours, with an implied absorption of duties from people whose positions have been eliminated, would affect their workloads. “How can I decrease my hours unless I decrease the tasks I am expected to complete.” Others stated that with reduced hours they would be forced to look for additional work elsewhere. “I am on the very low end of pay and truly cannot afford this.”

Most staff feel the longer the notice of a layoff the better, 51% for at least 4 weeks notice, 26% for 2 to 4 weeks notice, 16% for at least 2 weeks notice, and 5% for leaving the day of notification. Again equity issues were raised in the comments, ranging from “it should vary from position to position and from person to person”, to “fulfilling their contract” to “letters of recommendation.” Most wrote comments along the lines of “I feel the employees of the college have worked hard in the college’s best interest over the years and deserve to have as much notice as possible before being let go as well as a compensation package.” However, a few acknowledged that colleagues may “need to be relieved of their duties that day, that moment. Leaving them to linger at the workplace can only cause problems.”

When asked about compensation for involuntary separation, the answers varied. Some thought it should be the same as offered for the Voluntary Separation Plan; others commented that it could be less to acknowledge the decision made by the VSP participants. Many gave a time frame ranging from 2 weeks of pay up to a year (most suggestions were in the 1-4 months range). Others thought it should be tied to length of service. Some suggested there should be additional conditions along with monetary compensation such as use of campus resources, college health benefits, letters of recommendation, help with job searches, staff meal plan for a set time, and so on. Several comments said it depended on the reason for dismissal (no further explanation). One important consideration focused on parents using the tuition benefit for their college-attending children. Fairness concerns surfaced also, “the policy should be consistent regardless of salary range.”

The vast majority of staff, 85% wish to be notified of future job openings with 10% answering no to this question. “Maybe” comments indicated a dependence on the job, their qualifications, and “it would depend on the circumstances.” Most staff, 82%,

said they are willing to move to another position at the college; “Yes. While I love my job I’m sure other types of service to the college would be preferable to separation.” 5 % said no, while 23% said maybe citing similar reasons to prior question – “depends on the job.” As for splitting time between programs/departments, 77% were willing (many commented they already do so); 5% not; and 8% said maybe citing again that it would be very dependent on the duties and departments.

In regards to the level of communication, the numerical results indicate a balance between “enough” 44% and “not enough” 40%; 2% said it has been too much. Looking at the 80 comments is more instructive. Themes that emerged were – not enough of the right information, inconsistent information, and lacking trust in what they have been told. “Too much gossip and rumors... caused by not enough communication.” “I know the college is trying hard to do the right thing, but it seems like the higher-ups aren’t tuned in to what staff are worrying about.” There was also a sense that while the top echelon of administration has been forthcoming with information, on a program or departmental level this has not been the case.

Additional Comments

Some staff thanked Staff Council for providing this opportunity via the survey to communicate their thoughts and some pointed out that it should have been done earlier. Overall there was a sense of insecurity about jobs – keeping them/ changes to them / when we would know we don’t have a job, etc. Many comments talked about the stress of the situation being compounded by rumors, and frustration about staff being targeted. Staff craves information about the situation at the college, how it will affect their jobs, but also how it will affect the college on a whole, what students will experience. Staff want to contribute yet don’t feel their suggestions have always been acknowledged.

That 293 staff filled out the survey demonstrates their commitment to the college as a whole and the health and welfare of the community they work in and support.

Compiled by Staff Council on behalf of staff at Colorado College
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