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“A Cog in a Wheel That Gets It Done”: A Qualitative Study of the Experiences of Faculty Seeking Administrator Support

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study sought to determine the stressors that motivate faculty to seek administrator support and examined faculty experiences of administrator support. Participants were 27 full- and part-time faculty members who completed a seven-item online questionnaire. Findings show that many participants felt unsupported by their administrator while navigating the stressful situations for which they sought help. This lack of support led to negative departmental cultures and faculty feeling insecure, undervalued, and isolated. This study highlights the need for policies and practices designed to build relationships between faculty and administrators. Efforts to improve the faculty–administrator relationship can lead to increased understanding, promote communication, and create psychologically safe spaces for faculty in distress.

KEYWORDS: communication, faculty, administrator, support, Qualitative Methodology

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Introduction

Faculty members are the foundation of every academic institution. These individuals support teaching, engage in research, and provide service to the university. Faculty are in service to many, including students, peer faculty, committee leaders, research groups, the local community, and the broader disciplinary community. To say faculty serve an important role in the academic institution is an understatement. Indeed, faculty are vital to the continued growth of any institution. As such, it is important to understand the factors that influence faculty job satisfaction and retention. One factor impacting faculty satisfaction and retention is the health of the faculty–administrator dyad. This study explores tensions in the faculty–administrator relationship and the ways in which faculty seek and receive administrator support.

The higher education literature highlights many challenges in the faculty–administrator relationship, which at times can be “adversarial and conflict-laden” (Del Favero, 2003, p. 53) and even “contentious” (Del Favero & Bray, 2010, p. 477). Del Favero and Bray argued that this relationship is a fragile one, often marked by mistrust and a lack of cooperation. One reason for the disconnect is that faculty and administrators have divergent roles within the academic institution, and engage with one another for different reasons (Del Favero & Bray, 2005; Walmsley, 2016). Faculty seek administrator support for their faculty roles including research, teaching, and service. Their concerns rarely fall outside their department because their teaching, research, and service roles are typically discipline-specific. Administrators, on the other hand, have roles situated within the larger academic community and must attend to broader issues involving both faculty in their respective departments as well as faculty and administrators external to their home department.

Numerous scholars have studied the faculty–administrator relationship. These studies have resulted in various negative characterizations of the relationship. Guffey and Rampp (1997) found the relationship to be an uncomfortable alliance marked by strife. The relationship between faculty and administration often lacks frequent dialogue, further causing a disconnect between parties (Borland, 2003; Minor, 2004). Del Favero (2002) stated that faculty and administrators “tolerate” one another and give little attention to developing more collaborative relationships. Miller et al. (2003) found their interactions are often marked by ineffective communication.

Not surprisingly, research shows faculty dissatisfaction is correlated with the health of the faculty–administrator relationship. Savage (2017) found the relationship between faculty and administrators to be impacted most specifically by a lack of administrator trust and a lack of collegiality. In her assessment of faculty climate, Savage noted that faculty may choose to leave institutions when they feel their value is never established and when the department does not emphasize collegiality. In another study on faculty climate, Brown (2017) examined the factors that contribute to healthy faculty–administrator relationships and found that faculty want to forge relationships with administrators that consist of meaningful communication where administrators talk with faculty rather than at faculty. Miller et al. (2000) also found that faculty desire improved communication and trust between faculty and administrators. The importance of trust in this dyad is echoed by other scholars. Osburn and Gocial (2020), who studied faculty–administrator relationships in community colleges, found trust to be critical to the health of this dyadic relationship. Boies et al. (2015) found communication and trust to be key factors in the relationship between leaders and their teams. Fennell’s (2017) study on faculty climate found trust, communication, and transparency to be key factors affecting faculty climate. Yet, despite communication being

key to a healthy faculty–administrator relationship, Walmsley (2016) noted that communication is often lacking.

In addition to trust, communication, and collegiality, literature suggests that perceived support from academic administrators is an important factor impacting faculty satisfaction. Webber (2019) found that faculty dissatisfaction is, at least in part, directly related to perceptions of support from academic administrators. High levels of support increase employee retention and are reported as a primary reason faculty remain in their careers (Korte & Simonsen, 2018). Other studies confirm the importance of support on faculty satisfaction (Larson et al., 2019) as well as the importance of support on overall employee satisfaction (Eisenberger et al., 1986; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002). According to Isa et al. (2108), supervisor support can improve an employee’s predictability and increase feelings of purpose and hope in times of workplace distress. Given recent challenges facing higher education, not least of which has been the COVID-19 pandemic, administrator support is even more critical.

The importance of both peer and administrator support is a common theme in higher education literature. While Isa et al. (2018) cited the importance of supervisor support, they also suggested that peer support is important to workplace satisfaction, helping employees to feel less alone. This also is highlighted by Raina and Khatri (2015) who stated that positive coworker relationships and predictable norms create psychological safety for employees. Social support was found to be correlated with burnout as well (Sabagh et al., 2018). Higher levels of social support from both supervisors (Rothmann et al., 2008) and colleagues (Pedersen & Minnotte, 2017; Rothmann et al., 2008) are predictive of lower levels of burnout. Support from both leadership and colleagues also leads to improvements in overall well-being (Foy et al., 2019) and peer support serves as a coping strategy for workplace stressors (Schreurs et al., 2012). Unfortunately, not all faculty experience support in the same way. Older and more experienced faculty have fewer on-campus social support relationships than their colleagues (Boice, 2006) while faculty of color often face unfriendly and even hostile colleagues (Flaherty, 2020; S. R. Jones et al., 2021). The importance of colleague support cannot be understated. O’Meara et al. (2014) found that 25% of administrators and 21% of faculty attributed faculty departures to a lack of fit with departmental colleagues. Having a supportive relationship with colleagues and administrators is important for faculty satisfaction, productivity, and retention.

Counterproductive faculty–administrator relationships can negatively impact an institution. This important relationship affects the culture of an institution (Klensenski-Rispoli, 2019). When the faculty–administrator relationship is strained it can lead to decreased productivity and work quality (Bess & Dee, 2014), negative organizational relationships (Klensenski-Rispoli, 2019), unwanted changes to the institution’s reputation (Khan et al., 2021), and increased faculty turnover (Niewiesk & Garrity-Rokous, 2022). Thus, it is important that higher education institutions develop initiatives designed to promote work satisfaction and faculty support.

This study sought to determine faculty experiences of administrator support during times of distress. This study also sought to determine which individuals provided the greatest support to faculty during stressful situations. Thus, the following research questions guided this study:

- RQ1:** How do faculty experience administrator support?
- RQ2:** What are the outcomes of seeking administrator support?
- RQ3:** Who provides support to faculty experiencing stressful situations?

Methods

Participant Recruitment

Participants were recruited through a snowball sample that began with the authors' professional and social networks. Snowball sampling is a commonly used sampling method in social science research (Kirchherr, 2018) and is especially helpful in accessing hard-to-recruit populations including those who may desire anonymity or require trust to participate (C. Parker et al., 2019). Recruitment methods included email, phone calls, and postings on social media sites. Face-to-face recruitment was unavailable as data collection began during the COVID-19 pandemic. All participants were required to be part- or full-time faculty members. The study was approved by an Institutional Review Board and all participants were required to review an online consent form and acknowledge their voluntary participation.

Survey Design and Data Analysis

Participants responded to a seven-item open-ended online questionnaire hosted on Qualtrics. The questionnaire asked participants to elaborate on a stressful experience for which they requested support from a university administrator. The questionnaire also asked participants to explain their reasons for seeking support, the type of administrator from whom support was requested, the ways in which support was or was not provided by the administrator, and the outcomes of the participants' support request. The questionnaire also asked participants to identify the individuals, by role or relationship, most supportive during the stressful experience.

An inductive thematic analysis of participant responses was conducted. Thematic analysis is an interpretive organizational method of coding data into categories, or codes. These codes are then grouped into similar clusters, or themes, which help explain the phenomenon being studied (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). The descriptive nature of this research allows for a more holistic understanding of the human experience as well (Creswell, 2007; Sandelowski, 2004) and what Joffe (2011) deems "the most salient constellations of the meanings present in the dataset" (p. 209). This study relied on the framework for thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) which includes six steps: familiarizing oneself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report.

Findings

Seventy-nine individuals entered the questionnaire site and completed the online consent form. Of those 79 initial respondents, 27 completed questionnaires. These participants expressed multiple reasons for seeking administrator support and reported seeking support from several administrators. Findings show that most faculty indicated feeling unsupported by their administrator. This lack of support led to negative outcomes for participants. The findings are grouped into the following four sections: Seeking Support: Why and From Whom; Faculty Experiences of Administrator Support; Outcomes of Perceived Administrator Support; and Faculty Supporters.

Seeking Support: Why and From Whom

Participants in this study reported four primary stressors for which they sought administrator support. The most common reason was assistance navigating hostile work environments or hostile working conditions. Another commonly cited reason for seeking administrator support was health concerns. Two other reasons were frequently cited by participants as well: issues with workload and student challenges. Participants also reported asking for administrator guidance on issues related to problem faculty, grant writing, and search committee work.

Some participants experienced emotionally and physically hostile work environments. Participants reporting hostile work environments mentioned threats of physical harm by students, alumni, and department chairs as well as physical assault by a colleague. One participant explained, “I was abused by a fellow faculty member who actually threw an object at me in a meeting.” Participants also reported sexism and research theft by colleagues, as well as verbal abuse by department chairs, colleagues, and students. A participant explained their experience with verbal abuse by a student:

I had a student who became verbally abusive after class. Realizing that he was upset I asked other students to leave and for him to sit and we could talk. He sat, but continued to denigrate me, claiming that I had no right to lecture as I had wasted their time. I had been trying to demonstrate criterion-based problem-solving using the issue of students attempting to leave class early. He missed the point and would not permit me to explain, claiming that I was interrupting, silencing, and marginalizing him. With more attempts to speak, he stood up, slammed a chair on the floor, said “fuck you” and left the room slamming the door.

In addition to hostile environments, participants sought support for health issues. In this study most health issues were related to COVID-19. Other health concerns included mental health, a broken bone, and a family member’s cancer diagnosis. Additionally, participants sought support for workload equity and concerns over contract and tenure negotiations. One participant highlighted a work–life issue many new parents, especially mothers, face when on paternity/maternity leave:

We had a baby during COVID. We had a scheduled c-section. Work kept being assigned to me during a scheduled pregnancy despite a one week request to not work so I can be with my infant and stay safe from the pandemic.

In addition to these requests for administrator support, participants also reported asking administrators to intervene in student issues such as displays of racism in the classroom and student disregard for class policies.

Most participants reported seeking support from a dean or department chair. Seeking support from a dean is unsurprising, given that many participants reported concerns related to the behaviors of their department chairs. Several faculty reached out to provosts as well. Other administrators from whom faculty sought support included student conduct administrators, vice presidents, program directors, and coordinators.

Faculty Experiences of Administrator Support

Participants were asked to share their perceptions of received support and the outcomes of their support interactions. While there were participants who reported being satisfied with their administrator's provision of support, most participants reported feeling somewhat or completely unsupported by their administrator. Further, many participants who reported feeling initially supported by their administrator also felt that the administrator had failed in their overall management of the concern.

The following paragraphs describe the ways in which participants perceived administrator support. The ways in which faculty perceived support can be grouped into two themes: Initial Displays of Compassion and Positive and Negative Communication.

Initial Displays of Compassion

The most common ways administrators provided support to faculty were by displaying compassion. This includes expressions of concern, sympathy, empathy, and reassurance. Participants exhibited this in statements such as "He was compassionate about the situation, asked me how he and the college could be of support, and regularly asked me how I was doing with the entire situation" and "The only way I felt supported was that she offered sympathy that I was hurt . . ." and "The administrator expressed empathy for my situation and reassured me . . ." and "At first, the dean expressed concern and took it seriously."

As can be noted in these examples, participants did not always feel supported long-term, as indicated by statements that begin with "At first, the dean . . ." and "The only ways in which . . ." Indeed, while many of these participants reported initially feeling supported by these expressions of concern, sympathy, empathy, and reassurance, they indicated that support did not continue past the initial display of compassion. The participant who reported feeling supported because "At first, the dean expressed concern and took it seriously," continued by saying they felt unsupported when "It became very clear very quickly that my request for help was seen as a failure on my part to resolve the situation" and stated they felt micromanaged and treated as incompetent. Another mentioned that while their administrator initially was sympathetic to a health issue, the administrator was unwilling to offer help or be flexible thus causing the faculty member to put their health in danger to accomplish required job duties. Another participant said they felt reassured by multiple administrators but that neither were willing to intervene and help them with a verbally abusive colleague. The faculty member stated:

Unsupported in every possible way and also angered because it seemed like she felt that because she had to deal with this guy for 20+ years that I should not be exempt from his behavior . . . it just seemed so weird that the solve was to reassure me . . . but not to intercede. It was the accommodation of his pathology which was clearly the modus operandi of his whole career at the College that felt unsupportive.

Overall, participants' responses indicate that while they may have initially felt supported by their administrator, that support was not long-lasting nor did they experience a desired resolution.

Positive and Negative Communication

Communication was commonly mentioned by study participants as a key factor in perceptions of support. Many participants cited administrators' provision of communication as a way in which they felt supported by their administrator. However, participants also indicated that a lack of administrator communication led to negative experiences of support as well.

Those who experienced positive communication felt their administrators listened and provided solutions-oriented communication. Comments regarding listening were short and clear. For instance, "He made time to listen to my request," and "Initially they listened." Participants who mentioned communication typically mentioned responsiveness or solutions-oriented discussions. Examples of these comments include "Administrator sat down and discussed options with us" and "The dean was timely in response . . ." Participants felt supported when administrators were willing to discuss and collaborate on solutions to problems. However, just as with displays of compassion, many participants indicated communication was only initially received, highlighted by the above-mentioned comment, "Initially they listened." This participant went on to explain that while their administrator listened, the administrator had "no clue how much time was involved" in the faculty member's workload and therefore would not help. Another stated, "My dean gave me suggestions for how to handle it myself but . . . they told me to handle it myself" and indicated the administrator was unwilling to help them beyond providing possible solutions. Another mentioned their administrator provided solutions and said they would help as well, but the administrators' lack of follow-up communication meant the faculty member did not know what happened after the initial conversation. Though administrators engaged in positive communication behaviors initially, they failed to follow through or continue exhibiting supportive behaviors.

Though some participants shared a positive support experience, many did not. Most participants reporting a negative experience cited a lack of communication as a central failure. Comments such as "he never responded to emails" and "the chair did not respond—ignored faculty" demonstrated that faculty perceived a general lack of administrator responsiveness. A failure to communicate led participants to say they felt excluded and unsupported. One participant stated, "I wish I'd have had the chance to talk to anyone. I felt like I was being spoken about but never was included in any of the conversations" while another stated: "[I was] Being told, as a direct report, that I was not privy to certain information, being left out of the loop in critical situations that made it difficult to do my job." Others spoke to the different ways in which communication is provided by different administrators. One participant explained feeling unsupported by their communication with their department chair and more supported by their communication with their provost:

In every possible way—lack of communication, lack of resolution, lack of trust, lack of willingness [to] engage in what was clearly a serious problem that needed to be dealt with. But, ironically, my individual communication with the provost remained courteous, pleasant, and constructive.

Communication was mentioned as both a positive and negative support experience. Participants stated administrators listened and provided solutions-oriented communication, but also suggested these forms of communication were not enough to be helpful in resolving their concerns. In fact, a missing component of this communication was follow-up conversations and implementation

support. Even more damaging to experiences of support were those administrators who simply did not communicate at all. This lack of responsiveness also threatened trust.

Outcomes of Perceived Administrator Support

The ways in which faculty perceived support led to mostly negative outcomes for the situations for which they sought support or for their working relationships. While some participants did report conflicts being resolved, even if relationships deteriorated in the process, most participants indicated negative outcomes associated with either their request for help or a lack of administrator assistance in solving the problem. These negative outcomes can be best summarized in two themes: Negative Culture and Job Insecurity.

Negative Culture

Most participants indicated their work culture suffered because the problem for which they sought support was not solved. Some even claimed their work culture suffered as a result of seeking administrator support. Participants avoided their administrator as a result of poor relationships, contributing to feelings of distrust and a negative work culture. One participant said they now have the “worst department culture” in their 25+ years in their department. Another noted that while their administrator provided a helpful solution, their relationship has deteriorated:

This ruined my relationship with the dean. From then on the dean saw me as weak, unprepared, and incompetent despite my many years of proven work. The dean then engaged in bullying which seemed to be an attempt to get me to step down. I filed an HR complaint and was supported by HR. My relationship with the dean has stabilized but continues to be awkward and I try to keep my communication as short and infrequent as possible and to focus on task. What is interesting is that the suggestions given to me by the dean to resolve the situation actually made it better.

Despite efforts to seek support, participants failed to see a resolution and felt they were left to simply cope with the situation. A participant indicated nothing changed about the situation but that they, personally, were expected to change their behavior. Another shared that nothing was done to help remedy the problem but that the “administrator has since used my story in new faculty orientation as a lesson to others to be prepared for surprises in the classroom.” There were reported instances of the initial problem being resolved, but not before negatively impacting the culture. As one participant explained:

Finally, after anonymously reporting our experiences individually through an on-line external reporting system did anything get put into motion and did our dean get investigated. Though ultimately the dean was not found to have engaged in any serious wrongdoing and our provost actually yelled at all of us for taking that route instead of waiting and trusting them, we got what we wanted. The provost convinced our dean to step down and we have a competent and enthusiastic interim dean who we all support in place for two years. We are also getting an outside dean hire.

In perhaps one of the more extreme consequences of negative department culture, a participant explained that a faculty member sued both the department and individual faculty members before settling with the college.

Job Insecurity

Another issue commonly reported by participants was fear of losing their jobs as a result of seeking support or reporting a problem to an administrator. Some feared even reporting to an administrator at all. A participant described going to their department chair to report intellectual idea theft (theft of research). The chair did not intervene but the participant feared seeking support from a higher administrator because it “would guarantee I would lose my job” and “further complaining” would not result in a resolution. Another participant came to view themselves as “expendable” due to the way the administrator responded to their request for support. In a situation of verbal abuse by a student, one participant explained how reporting the situation to an administrator was used against them:

[The student] sent an email apologizing, but I learned later that the student gossiped and claims to have gotten me into trouble. He was not held accountable for his actions. The incident was later used to claim that I was ineffective.

Many participants' comments can be summed up by the following comment from a participant who experienced a declining office culture due to the administrator's unwillingness to address a problem: “Being heard is important even when there is not [an] obvious solution. Being respected and valued for contributions is important rather than being seen as a cog in a wheel that gets it done.”

Faculty Supporters

Participants were asked what and/or who was most supportive to them during the experience for which they requested administrator support. Overwhelmingly, participants reported their colleagues as their greatest supports. One faculty member stated, “My colleagues—the other faculty in my school—were the only reason we got through this . . . Us working together as a cohesive faculty was the only way this got resolved.”

Respondents suggested that trust influenced perceptions of colleague support. Despite identifying colleagues as being most supportive, a participant noted that “Colleagues were supportive privately but not publicly” while another mentioned “colleagues that I trust” as being among their greatest supporters, and yet another stated they received support from “a few trusted colleagues.”

In rare cases, respondents mentioned receiving support from deans and provosts. Instead, participants sought and found support in other places including family, department chairs, human resources, and office administrators. Another participant mentioned their faith as being the greatest support to them during their experience.

Unfortunately, there also were several participants who felt they did not receive any support. One participant noted they received “nothing” as support and stated, “I was left to be abused.” Others did not elaborate on their experience, simply stating that “no one” provided them support.

Discussion

This study explored faculty–administrator relationships during times of stress. This study sought to better understand the faculty–administrator dyad by examining the ways in which faculty experience administrator support. This study also explored the ways in which these experiences impact faculty, and identified the people who serve as support providers to faculty during stressful situations.

The findings of this study echo those of previous studies that highlight the challenges of this relationship. For decades, scholars have noted this “contentious” (Del Favero & Bray, 2005, p. 53) and “conflict-laden” (Del Favero & Bray, 2010, p. 477) relationship as fragile yet important. While marked by ineffective communication (Walmsley, 2016), a lack of trust (Fennell, 2017; Osburn & Gocial, 2020) and an inability to work together (Minor, 2004), the faculty–administrator relationship is important to academic institutions as the faculty–administrator relationship impacts faculty satisfaction. Faculty satisfaction is linked to important institutional issues such as faculty productivity (Mamiseishvili & Rosser, 2011) and faculty retention (Malati et al., 2012; Tack & Patitu, 1992; Richter et al., 2022). Given the importance of the faculty–administrator relationship, it is especially important for administrators to take note of the challenges to that relationship and seek meaningful and impactful ways to support their faculty.

Points of Stress: Bullying, Incivility, and Negative Culture

This study identified myriad points of stress for faculty members including hostile work environments, difficult work cultures, and even physically or emotionally threatening experiences. Examples included verbal abuse by students, colleagues, and administrators as well as threats of or actual physical harm (such as throwing objects). College student aggressiveness and the factors that impact aggressiveness have been extensively studied (e.g., Goodboy & Myers, 2012; Horan et al., 2010; Infante, 1995; Kinney et al., 2001). However, academic bullying, or incivility, among adults has only recently begun receiving attention in the literature. Academic bullying refers to the harassment of educators by educators or to the repeated hostile behaviors of academic supervisors. While academic bullying has been well-researched in the primary school context (e.g. Cemaloglu, 2011; Fox & Stallworth, 2010; Gray & Gardiner, 2013), King and Piotrowski (2015) also identified several types of adult academic bully relationships and types. These types include the “intimidator,” the “flatterer,” the “manipulator,” the “bully extraordinaire,” and the “group bullies.” These types refer to relationships between administrators and faculty (intimidator), administrators and subordinates (flatterers and manipulators), faculty and their faculty colleagues (bully extraordinaire), and students and faculty (group bullies). According to their study, a common thread in each of these negative relationships is the involvement of an administrator, either as a perpetrator or by failing to take appropriate action to remedy situations of incivility or bullying. This was a common issue amongst participants in this current study with most reporting their administrator as either exhibiting bullying behaviors or failing to take action to resolve other bullying behaviors.

A report by Huang et al. (2022) claimed bullying is common in colleges and universities, where “senior faculty and administrators routinely threaten, shame, belittle, and retaliate against graduate teaching assistants, researchers, undergraduates, and others” (para 7). Moss and Mahmoudi (2021) also found academic bullying to be rampant in higher education. Their study found common forms

of academic bullying to include ridicule, threatening, public shaming, academic theft, and taking steps that impacted funding or job security. While participants in this study did not name their experiences as bullying, they did report experiences in which they were physically threatened, experienced academic theft, and felt their job security was threatened.

Hollis (2021) suggested that nearly 60% of those in higher education have experienced some form of bullying. Unfortunately, many faculty do not report these experiences. Moss and Mahmoudi (2021) explained that of the nearly 2,000 participants in their study, 71% did not report incidents of bullying out of fear of retaliation. This fear is confirmed by the participants of this present study. Participants frequently stated feeling as though their job was in jeopardy or that by seeking support they were seen as “weak” or as “complaining.” Several participants stated feeling as though asking for support was held against them by their administrator. Many participants also identified their department chairperson as a source of stress. However, some of those individuals chose not to seek more senior administrator support for fear of retaliation by their chairperson.

Academic bullying, or incivility, can have serious consequences for higher education. Hollis (2021) claimed that as much as \$27 billion is spent each year due to cultural disruption and turnover and that as many as 75% of people leave negative institutional cultures. O’Meara et al. (2014) found that faculty who leave their positions do so most often because of uncollegial behavior, academic bullying, and a lack of departmental leadership. Hollis explained that toxic academic departments and institutions cannot afford the negative reputation and higher turnover that comes with harboring bad actors. In addition to poor retention of faculty, Meyer (2021) pointed out that a negative workplace culture leads to low faculty morale and drains the institution of valuable resources. It can also prevent people from wanting to join the academy. Langin (2021) conducted a qualitative survey of responses to the Moss and Mahmoudi (2021) study. Langin quoted one participant who initially wanted to be a professor as saying “I do not want to ever be involved with academia again” because of their negative experience with a faculty supervisor.

This study found that faculty often felt that administrators offered initial support but failed to adequately follow through. Early validation or compassion rarely led to resolution or perceived continued support. When faculty do not feel safe reporting challenging situations, or see their administrator as a source of stress, they are more likely to experience low morale, job dissatisfaction, and a desire to exit the institution.

Faculty Perceptions of Support Provision

Decades of scholarship highlight both the physical and psychological benefits of social support (Moore, 2018; Wright, 2016). Social support, intentional communication designed to provide help, is important in helping people cope with stressful events and can reduce uncertainty about stressful situations (Albrecht & Adelman, 1987; Ko et al., 2013). This study found that when faculty received social support, they felt it was a largely positive experience. However, when faculty perceived a lack of support, they experienced negative outcomes including loss of trust, fear, and frustration.

Cutrona and Suhr (1992) defined social support in five ways: informational, emotional, esteem, tangible, and social network support. Informational support is the communication of advice or knowledge; emotional support is the communication of caring, encouragement, concern, empathy, or sympathy. Esteem support refers to the communication meant to promote or compliment another’s skills or value. Tangible support is the provision of physical assistance, such as goods

or services. Lastly, social network support communicates belonging to or companionship with a specific group. Participants indicated receiving emotional support (compassionate communication and listening) as well as informational support (solutions-oriented communication) from administrators.

Initial experiences of support from administrators included displays of compassion or the communication of concern, reassurance, and empathy. Administrators perceived as providing support validated faculty experiences, offered assistance, expressed empathy or sympathy, and generally listened to the faculty member's situation. Support was also communicated through responsiveness to email and other communication as well as the willingness to offer solutions for managing stressful situations.

Unfortunately, the support received by faculty participating in this study was mostly temporary. Most participants indicated that while they may have initially felt supported by their administrator, the support did not continue and was limited to displays of compassion, listening, or the discussion of possible solutions without actual resolution. Participants indicated wanting more and different forms of support from their administrator. In addition to expressing a need for esteem support (specifically validation of their concerns), many participants wanted more tangible and instructional support. Faculty mentioned feeling unsupported when administrators did not intervene in situations by doing things such as holding meetings with bad actors (such as those committing bullying behaviors). Additionally, participants noted a lack of follow-through on prior conversations in which an administrator offered help. After initial displays of instructional support, this form of support also tapered off. Participants indicated that a lack of continued emotional or instructional support coupled with a lack of tangible assistance led them to feel excluded, unsupported, ignored, and expendable.

Participants were asked specifically who (or what) they found to be most supportive while navigating the stressful situation they reported. Most faculty agreed that colleagues provided the greatest support. These colleagues provided emotional support and helped faculty cope with their situations by listening and communicating empathy. Participants also reported receiving social network support from their colleagues. A. Parker et al. (2016) suggested people use their social relationships to locate and organize the resources needed to accomplish work. Faculty in this study noted that support came in the form of faculty colleagues organizing as a unit to resolve a department or administrator-created issue. The relationships formed through social network support are important to faculty well-being and success. These relationships can provide faculty with friendship, mentoring, and links to important social ties (Pifer & Baker, 2013). This is especially important for pre-tenure faculty (Emmerick & Sanders, 2004) but has implications for all faculty.

Another factor impacting support relationships was trust. Trust was mentioned repeatedly by the participants of this study. Faculty members described instances in which they did not feel trusted by their administrator and situations in which they did not feel they could trust their administrator. They also mentioned trust as being important to colleague relationships.

Trust is important to the health of the faculty-administrator relationship (Fennell, 2017; Osburn & Gocial, 2020). Unfortunately, the faculty-administrator relationship is often marred by a lack of trust (Savage, 2017; Walmsley, 2016). One reason for this, according to Hoppes and Holley (2014) is the decentralized and divergent work of faculty and administrators. The role of trust in the faculty-administrator relationship is highlighted in the findings of this study. Participants

noted feeling untrusted by administrators and noted feeling like they could not trust their administrator. This lack of trust was most often associated with a failure to provide follow-up tangible support after initially providing instructional or emotional support. However, faculty also expressed concerns about trust in the promotion and tenure review process. Research by Shoho and Smith (2004) supported this concern. Their study found that as faculty advance in rank, faculty trust in administrators begins to diminish. A lack of trust may be exacerbated by a faculty member's sense that administrators do not understand faculty workloads or support needs.

In their years of research on trust between faculty and administrators, Fiore and Koverola (2021) noted that trust is often tested during times of crisis and that failure to share information can be viewed by faculty as corruption of either the administrator or the institution. They suggest that administrators engage in listening, demonstrate inclusive leadership, and show compassion to improve the health of the faculty-administrator relationship. Taking the initiative to build this relationship will then serve as a basis for a more trusting relationship between faculty and administrators when stressful situations arise.

This study found trust to be important to colleague relationships as well. During stressful situations, participants felt they received emotional and social network support from trusted colleagues, implying that some colleagues were not viewed as trustworthy. However, colleague support was typically received in private and participants felt colleagues were not always willing to show public support.

According to Bray et al. (2019) faculty may choose to support their colleagues privately because some issues can be difficult to discuss in public, even when the problems within a department or with an individual are well known by others. They suggest that faculty issues, like academic theft, perceived bias, and even faculty misconduct are often best navigated privately and interpersonally. In another article, Bray et al. (2018) suggested a number of reasons why faculty may choose not to become publicly involved in conflict. Faculty members may fear alienating their fellow colleagues and choose to overlook bad behavior rather than discuss it. Another reason for a lack of public support is that faculty are often discouraged from speaking up about departmental issues. This is often due to already unhealthy department cultures. Colleagues must feel safe to speak up in public (Bray et al., 2018). This feeling of safety comes from perceived organizational trust. In this study, faculty reported some level of organizational distrust which may explain why their colleagues hesitated to provide public support.

Regardless of how social support is received, be it in public or in private, the effects of social support are well-documented, especially in work environments. Cohen and McKay (1984) and Cohen and Willis (1985) explored the stress buffering effect of social support. The stress buffering model of social support theorizes that social support plays a role in the stressor-stress relationship. The model has shown that those with limited social support report higher levels of stress while those with more support report lower stress levels (Rui & Guo, 2022). Viswesvaran et al. (1999) found that social support has a threefold effect on the relationship between work stressors and strains. Their study found "social support reduced the strains experienced, social support mitigated perceived stressors, and social support moderated the stressor-strain relationship" (p. 314). Social support has also been linked to reductions in teacher burnout (Burke & Greenglass, 1993) and in the recovery from traumatic or distressing workplace events (Birkeland et al., 2017). This study supports the claim that social support is an important factor in creating healthy and functional

work environments. Administrator support can help reduce faculty strains, buffer faculty from stress, and improve organizational culture.

Limitations

As with all studies, this one is not without limitations. This study was conducted during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pandemic greatly impacted the way in which administrators, faculty, and students experienced higher education. Thus, it is possible that some of the reported experiences were worsened, or even created, by the pandemic as both administrators and faculty found themselves in uncharted territory for managing and educating. However, it is also possible that the pandemic created opportunities for faculty by reducing pressure points like in-office politics (Prasad et al., 2020). Certainly, the pandemic created opportunities for faculty to learn about strategic planning, resilience, distance learning, technological advances, and even crisis management; however, Levine (2020) explained that the pandemic also presented faculty members with time to “refocus and clarify their dedication to science, students, and humanity” (p. 1525).

A limitation resulting from the pandemic is that this study was conducted using an online open-ended questionnaire rather than via face-to-face interviews. Interview data can be very rich, creating space for follow-up questions and elaboration. The decision to use an online questionnaire was a direct result of faculty being off-campus due to the pandemic and reports of online and video fatigue by those teaching at home. While software programs like Zoom or Google Meet can provide an opportunity for interviews to take place, the original IRB protocol did not allow for face-to-face or mediated interviews and the continued closure of universities prevented quick, if any, modifications to existing IRB protocols.

Another limitation of this study is that no participant demographic data was collected. Literature suggests there are several demographic factors associated with faculty satisfaction. For instance, women report lower job satisfaction scores than men (Bozeman & Gaughan, 2011; Webber & Rogers, 2018). Further, faculty of color are often not welcomed into the academy, and are choosing to leave the profession due to, among other issues, feelings of isolation and dissatisfaction with a poor campus climate (L. Jones, 2019). Hollis (2021) also found that women and people of color experience academic bullying because they are less likely to hold positions of power on college campuses. Adjunct faculty also experience higher levels of job dissatisfaction (Grappa et al., 2007) possibly due to feelings of isolation and a lack of support (Greive & Worden, 2000). Additionally, Shrestha (2019) reported senior faculty being largely satisfied with their jobs; however, Boice (2006) indicates that older, more experienced faculty are less likely than their colleagues to have on-campus social support, which is linked to overall satisfaction. It is important that researchers continue to explore these linkages.

Lastly, while sample size is not a limitation of qualitative research (Mason, 2010; Ritchie et al., 2003), it is important to note that 79 individuals initially entered the survey site but only 27 completed questionnaires. This could be due to myriad reasons; however, people may feel uncomfortable

reporting negative work experiences. Participants who share personal information are concerned that their disclosures will be kept secure (Perri et al., 2018; Wolgemuth et al., 2015). Respondents also may have strong emotional responses to providing these disclosures such as anger or anxiety. Others may fear retribution from their colleagues or supervisors and choose not to disclose their experiences (Oates, 2019). As this questionnaire was completed online, the authors could not assess discomfort via traditional verbal or nonverbal cues. It is also possible there are other reasons for these individuals choosing not to complete the questionnaire.

Conclusion

Darlington (1960) stated, “It is my belief that there is no single or unique answer to the problem of appropriate faculty–administration relationships” (p. 265). Indeed, this study found myriad reasons for the historically troubled faculty–administrator relationship. This study identifies the importance of creating positive academic cultures and highlights the negative behaviors that can lead to poor cultures, such as academic bullying and incivility, poor or absent communication, concerns about retaliation and job security, and a lack of sustained social support. This study makes it clear that trust, open and consistent communication, access to information and resources, and expressions of compassion are key elements of healthy faculty–administrator relationships. As noted earlier, the lack of these elements can have serious and lasting implications on faculty–administrator relationships, job satisfaction, faculty retention, stress, and burnout. Creating healthy cultures in which faculty can thrive is crucial for the vitality of higher education institutions.

Unfortunately, administrators are rarely afforded opportunities for training and development before assuming their administrative roles. In fact, Cipriano and Riccardi (2012) claimed that as few as 3.3% of department chairs are formally trained in the administrative skills needed for their positions. Gmelch (2000) indicated that because deans typically rise through the faculty ranks, they often come into their administrator roles without leadership training and with limited administrative experience. Given the findings of this study, leadership training is recommended for all new and current administrators. Administrators may also find a faculty audit useful in determining the needs and expectations of their colleagues. The findings of this study indicate that faculty may appreciate the opportunity to provide such feedback and that doing so may serve to open lines of communication and strengthen trust in the administrator.

College and university faculty play a vital role in the success of any institution. Their success impacts department and institutional culture, reputation, resources, and student success. While the focus of most institutions is on the students, this study highlights the importance of policies and practices aimed at improving the faculty experience and normalizing discussions of culture within departments. These results also emphasize the need for relationship-building between administrators and faculty in an effort to increase understanding, promote supportive and productive communication, and create psychologically safe spaces for faculty in distress.

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