

Addressing Burnout in Higher Education: Individual and Organizational Solutions

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Keynote Address for the 2023 CCNY Conference

Land Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the land on which the University at Buffalo operates, which is the territory of the Seneca Nation, a member of the Haudenosaunee/Six Nations Confederacy. This territory is covered by The Dish with One Spoon Treaty of Peace and Friendship, a pledge to peaceably share and care for the resources around the Great Lakes. It is also covered by the 1794 Treaty of Canandaigua, between the United States Government and the Six Nations Confederacy, which further affirmed Haudenosaunee land rights and sovereignty in the State of New York.

I acknowledge the truth of violence perpetrated by white settler colonialism and the continued violence when Indigenous people's histories are erased, cultures trivialized, resources seized, labor exploited, children stolen, and lives taken. As occupiers of this land, we must listen and amplify Indigenous voices, while fighting against our complicity.

-Adapted from the University at Buffalo and Emerson College Land Acknowledgements

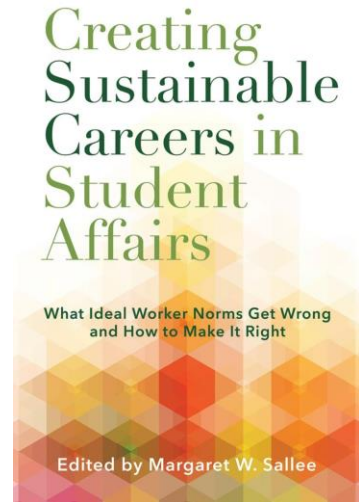
CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

THE PRESENTERS
HAVE NO ACTUAL
OR POTENTIAL
CONFLICTS OF
INTEREST IN
RELATION TO THIS
PROGRAM.

Outline of Presentation


- ◎ Higher education and The Great Resignation
- ◎ Ideal worker norms in higher education
- ◎ Small Group Discussion: How have you seen ideal worker norms in your life?
- ◎ Report Out
- ◎ Disrupting ideal worker norms
 - ◎ Organizational and individual interventions

Small Group Discussion: Disrupting ideal worker norms






Part 1: Higher Education and The Great Resignation



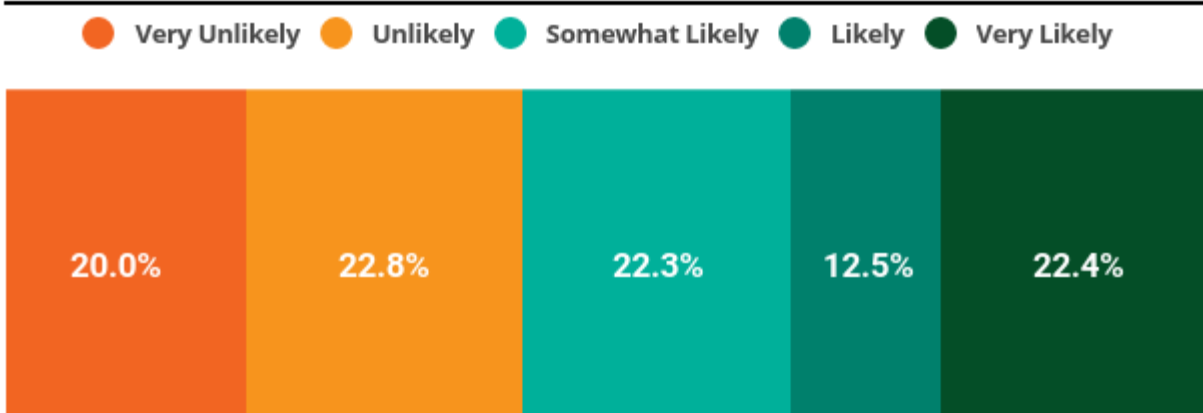
57% of respondents to a survey of higher education employees are likely to look for a new job in the next year.

(CUPA-HR, July 2022)



2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next 12 Months



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Over **one-third** of student affairs professionals are **actively job searching**.

37% of student affairs professionals are actively searching for a new job

10% searching only in higher ed

19% searching only outside of higher ed

8% searching both

50% of student affairs professionals have been encouraged to change jobs

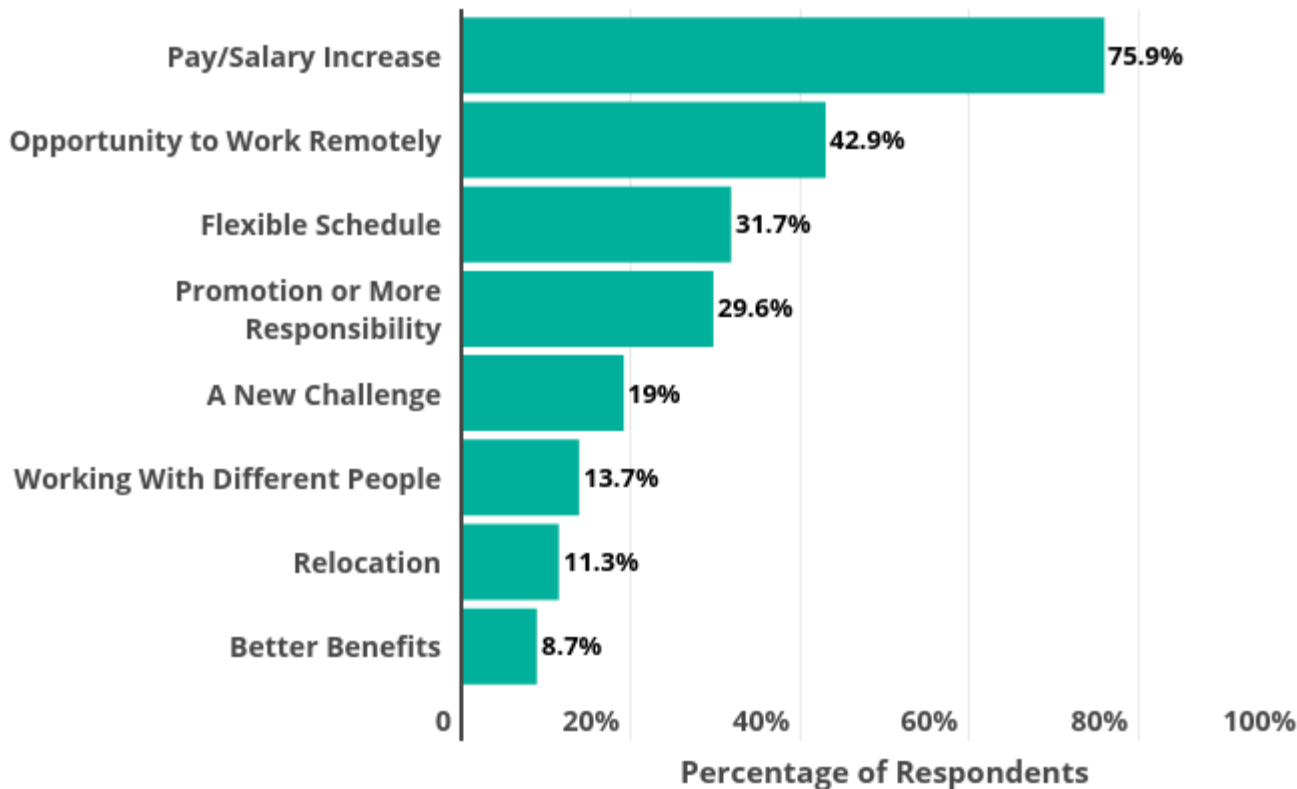
5% from contacts at other institutions

14% from contacts outside of higher ed

31% from both

Results of SACSA/Skyfactor survey of 324 SA pros in Fall 2022.

Reasons Employees Are Seeking New Opportunities





Despite loving the work, many student affairs professionals do not see a future at their current institution.

13% Highly satisfied with job opportunities across their institution

14% Highly satisfied with career advancement opportunities within their institution

25% Highly satisfied with opportunities for training at their institution

And, student affairs professionals feel a range of pain points in their jobs.



Pay

Only **17%** said their salary is competitive to the market



Departures

43% were negatively impacted by the departure of close colleagues



Leadership

30% did not agree that their institution's leadership takes action on employee feedback




Meetings

48% said too many or ineffective meetings negatively impacted their satisfaction



Workload

45% said increased workloads during peak seasons negatively impacted their satisfaction

A decorative network diagram in the top-left corner, consisting of interconnected nodes and lines, some solid and some dashed, in shades of gray.

**Counseling center
professionals note
similar challenges.**

Counseling Centers Report High Turnover

- ◎ 2017-2018: 51.8% of counseling centers experienced turnover
- ◎ 2020-2021: 61.3% of counseling centers experienced turnover

Of the 61.3% centers that experienced turnover, 70% had difficulty filling the open position(s).

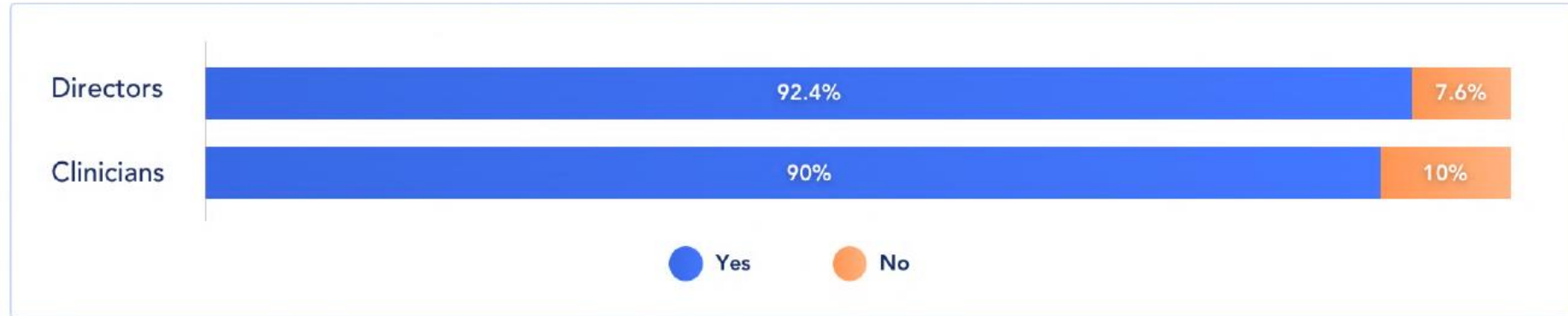
(AUCCCD, 2023)

Counseling Center Staff Report Burnout

- Over 90% of counseling center staff reporting experiencing burnout

Figure 1. Self-Reported Burnout Among Counseling Center Directors and Clinicians

Do you feel that you are experiencing some form of employee burnout in your workplace?



(Walden et al., 2021)

Counseling Center Staff Dissatisfaction

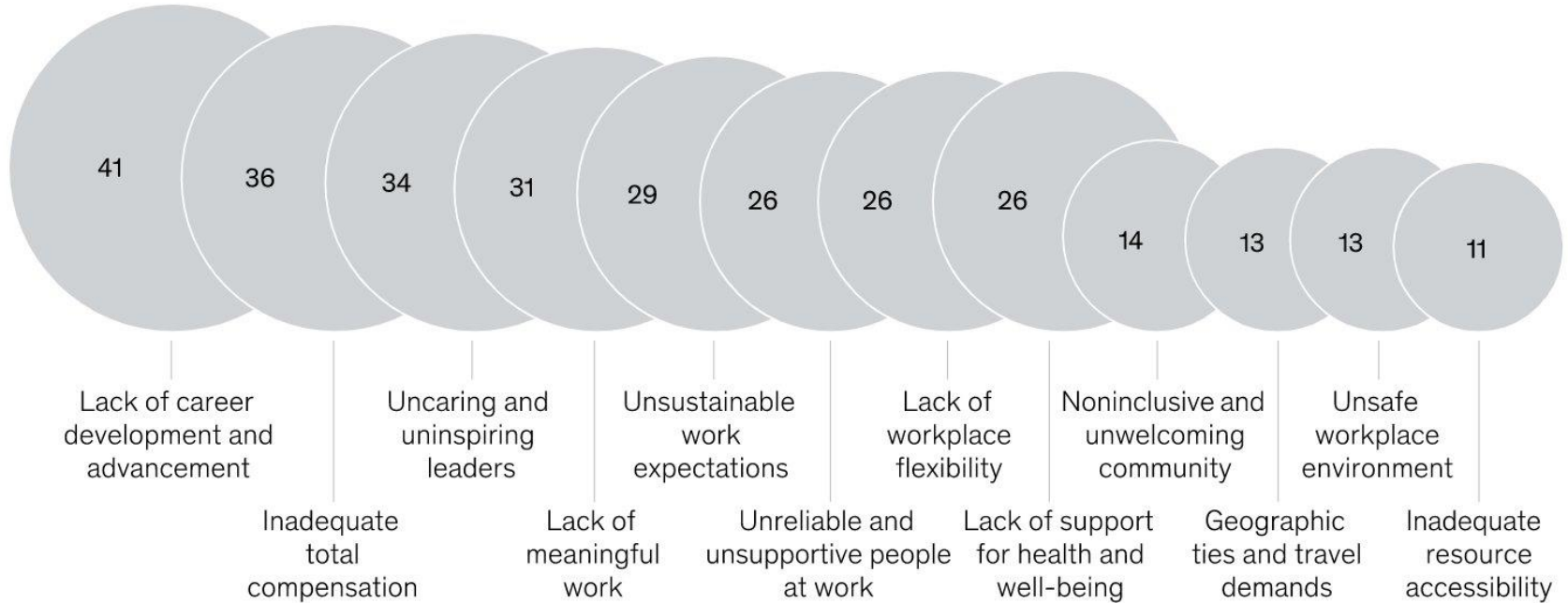
- ⦿ Increase in work hours
- ⦿ Greater volume and complexity of cases
- ⦿ Low pay compared to private sector

(AUCCCD, 2023; Walden et al., 2021)

A decorative network diagram in the top-left corner, consisting of interconnected nodes and lines, rendered in a light gray color. The nodes are represented by small circles, some solid and some hollow, connected by thin lines.

**These trends echo
national and
international trends.**

Top reasons for quitting previous job, Apr 2021–Apr 2022, %



Source: Subset of respondents from McKinsey's 2022 Great Attrition, Great Attraction 2.0 global survey (n = 13,382), including those currently employed and planning to leave (n = 4,939), those currently employed and planning to stay (n = 7,439), and those who quit their previous primary jobs between Apr 2021 and Apr 2022 (n = 1,154)



What is going on?

The foundational norms of the contemporary higher education workplace are exacerbating burnout and driving people to leave.



Part 2: Ideal Worker Norms in Higher Education

Who Is the Ideal Worker?

- ◎ Ideal worker is someone who is always available to the organization with no outside responsibilities presumed to interfere.
- ◎ *“The ideal worker is one who can work a minimum of 40 hours a week and has no career interruptions (such as time out for childbirth, infant care, or care for the sick)—and can do the things required for “normal” career advancement—which frequently includes the ability to work overtime and the willingness to travel . . . Employers are taught they can expect this.” (Williams, 1989, p. 833)*

Jonnie Hallman @destroytoday Gestern

Still have no idea how people can...

- ✓ work a full-time job
- ✓ cook dinner often
- ✓ exercise regularly
- ✓ enjoy weekends
- ✓ keep the apartment clean

Seems basic, but I can't consistently do it.

shine a light @rknLA Vor 14 Stunden

Current full-time (40hr/wk) jobs aren't designed for single people to do this; they're post-war relics & depend on the unpaid labor of a spouse for cooking, cleaning, shopping, etc.

You're not deficient for not being able to do it yourself


Ideal worker norms are not realistic, especially for the 21st century workforce.

Who Is the Ideal Worker?

- ◎ The ideal worker is a deeply gendered, raced, and classist construct
- ◎ ***“Filling the abstract job is a disembodied worker who exists only for the work. Such a hypothetical worker cannot have other imperatives of existence that impinge upon the job . . . The closest the disembodied worker doing the abstract job comes to a real worker is the male worker whose life centers on his full-time, life-long job, while his wife or another woman takes care of his personal needs and his children.” (Acker, 1990, p. 149)***

Who Is the Ideal Worker?

- ◎ *“The abstract, bodiless worker, who occupies the abstract, gender-neutral job has no sexuality, no emotions, and does not procreate” (Acker, 1990, p. 151)*
- ◎ *“Disembodied worker[s] who exist . . . only for the work” (Acker, 1990, p. 149)*



**And yet, we are
so much more
than our work.**

Consequences of Ideal Worker Norms



- ◎ Work/life conflict
- ◎ Burnout
- ◎ Secondary trauma
- ◎ Attrition from the institution and the field

Consequences of Ideal Worker Norms

- ◎ Ideal worker norms are costly to both the individual and the institution and lead to high attrition rates
- ◎ Related reasons for attrition
 - Low pay
 - Unsupportive supervisors
 - Lack of advancement opportunities
 - Excessive work hours
 - Burnout
 - Work/life conflict

Consequences of Ideal Worker Norms

- ⦿ Working too many hours:
 - ⦿ 67% of survey respondents said they work more than what is considered full-time while 10% said they work an extra 16 hours plus per week
 - ⦿ 58% agreed that their positions required additional hours
 - ⦿ 63% suggested that they took on additional responsibilities due to staff who left during the pandemic

Forces that Perpetuate Ideal Worker Norms

- ◎ Socialization into the field
- ◎ Institutional type differences
 - Research university versus community college
- ◎ Functional area differences
 - Residence life versus counseling centers versus career services
- ◎ Identity-based demands
 - Extra service/labor/trauma for folx of color

Differential Impact of Ideal Worker Norms

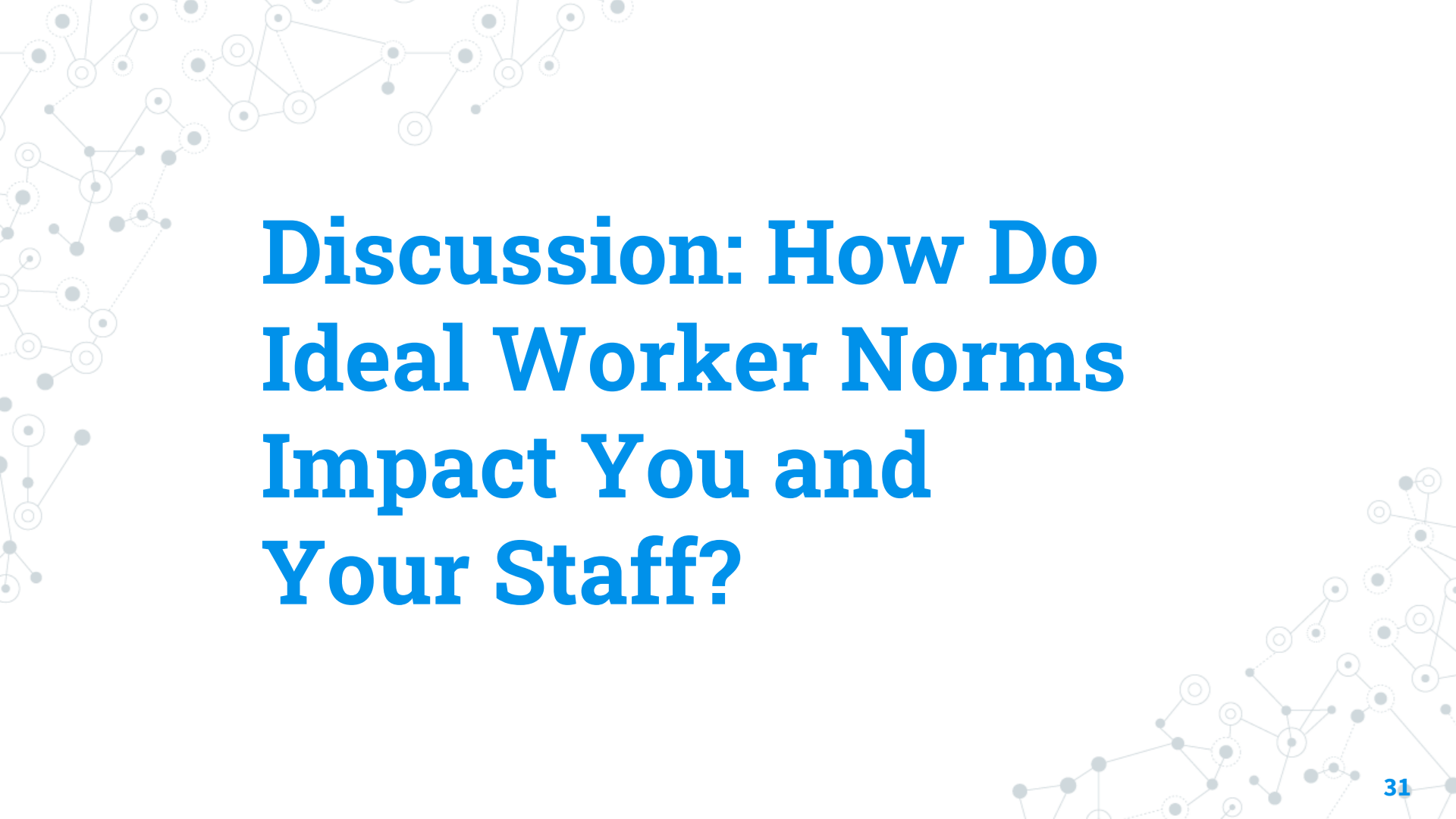
- ◎ Colleges are not race-neutral (Ray, 2019)
 - Racialized organizations expand and inhibit agency, legitimate resources, and treat whiteness as a credential
 - Who carries the burden and who receives support? Who is judged as meritorious?
- ◎ Societal norms replicate inequities
 - Staff of color navigate racial battle fatigue as well as dual pandemics of both COVID-19 and racism

Differential Impact of Ideal Worker Norms

- ◎ Colleges are not gender-neutral
 - Policies, structures, and interactions replicate gender hierarchies (Acker, 1990)
- ◎ Parents face different demands navigating work and family (Sallee, 2014; Sallee et al., 2021; Ward & Wolf-Wendel, 2012)
- ◎ Caregivers are particularly challenged with burnout due to ideal worker norms
- ◎ Parents navigated pandemic demands, ideal worker demands, and parenting demands—and many are still experiencing repercussions from doing so

Ideal Worker Norms in Student Affairs

- ⊙ Goal of helping students succeed holistically conflicts with not allowing SA professionals to do the same
- ⊙ 24/7 availability expectations conflicts with needs to set boundaries
- ⊙ Norms of “self sacrifice” conflicts with being an authentic self
- ⊙ Concerned about student wellness conflicts with needs for personal wellness
- ⊙ Expectations of “doing more with less”



Discussion: How Do Ideal Worker Norms Impact You and Your Staff?

How Do Ideal Worker Norms Impact You?

- ◎ How are ideal worker norms evident in your work?
- ◎ How have you perpetuated ideal worker norms?
- ◎ What impact do ideal worker norms have on you and others around you?



Part 3: Disrupting Ideal Worker Norms

Organizational and Individual
Interventions

Us-care instead of self-care



Organizational Interventions

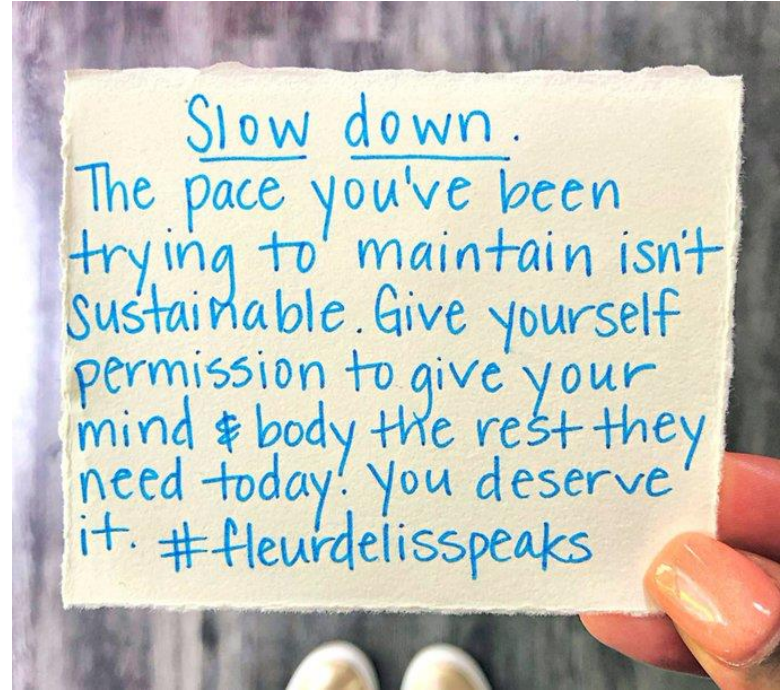


Organizational Interventions

- ◎ Remote work
- ◎ Flexible schedules
- ◎ Four-day work week
- ◎ Redistribute/reduce work
- ◎ Scheduling of department events
- ◎ Reduce use of technology
- ◎ Meeting-free Fridays
- ◎ Rethink meetings entirely
- ◎ Parental/family leave
- ◎ Childcare (on-campus, referral, emergency)
- ◎ Tuition assistance
- ◎ Housing assistance
- ◎ Others?

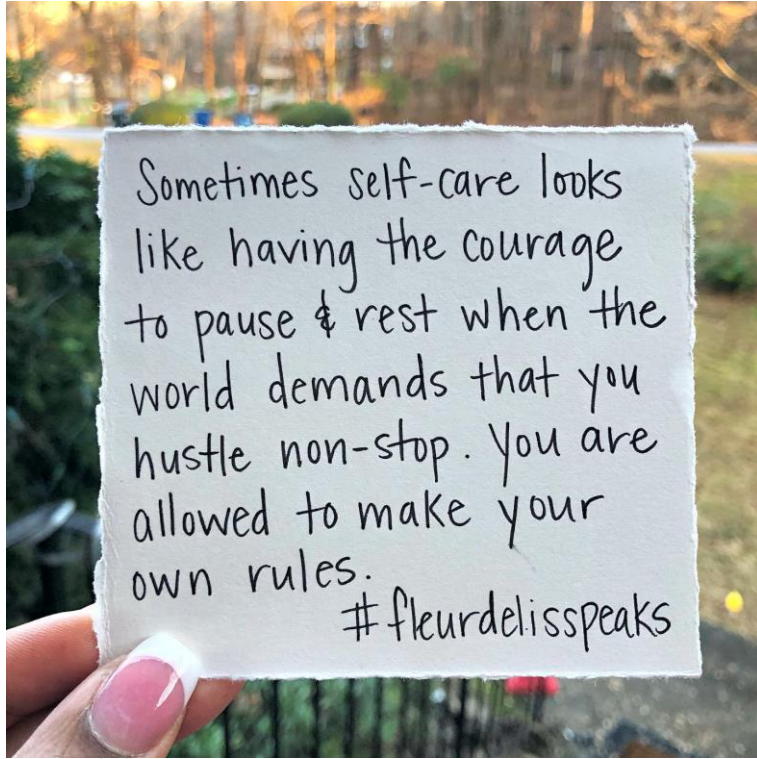
Individual Interventions

Start by having grace for yourself (and others around you). This is an extraordinarily stressful time.



Individual Interventions

- ⊙ Acknowledge the benefits and drawbacks of technology
- ⊙ Learn to say no
- ⊙ Set boundaries
- ⊙ Draw on your support network
- ⊙ Make family visible
- ⊙ Make time for self-care



Gabriel Rodríguez Lemus, Jr.
@grodriguezlemus

Self-care should not be about helping you be productive again.

Self-care should be a reminder that you are more important than productivity.

Disrupting Ideal Worker Norms



- ◎ Each of us approaches disrupting ideal worker norms from different experiences and professional positions
 - Consider how race and gender intersect to shape how actions are perceived
- ◎ We all are complicit in perpetuating ideal worker norms and all have various levels of agency to disrupt them individually and collectively

Disrupting Ideal Worker Norms from Two Perspectives

- ◎ Individual: things I can do for myself
- ◎ Organizational: things we can do for each other

Disruption Scale

Conform

Resist

Confront



Small Group Discussion: Strategies for Disrupting Ideal Worker Norms

Small Group Discussion

- ◎ What might it look like and feel like in your office or entire division if we moved away from ideal worker norms?
- ◎ What might you change to make this vision a reality?
- ◎ What institutional actors need to be involved?
 - ◎ Who might provide resistance and who might provide support?
 - ◎ What steps can you put into place to appropriately address each group?

Moving Forward

- ◎ Think about some of the ideas discussed today. Send yourself one or more emails in which you list 2 to 3 strategies that you are going to put into place to confront ideal worker norms, either individually or organizationally.
 - Consider doing a delayed send for a few months out (or schedule on your calendar) to also check in to see if you are still engaging in/working on these practices.



Thank you!

Please keep in touch!

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