



April 2022

2021 Staff Climate Survey, Pre-Print Research Brief

By: Elizabeth Martin

The purpose of the Staff Climate Survey (SCS) is to provide awareness of staff members' views regarding campus climate for diversity, and the Cooperative Institutional Research Program has been administering the Staff Climate Survey since 2017. Survey items within the SCS overlap with the Diverse Learning Environments (DLE) survey and the HERI Faculty Survey (FAC), enabling institutions to compare perceptions of the campus climate for diversity among students, faculty, and staff. The sample for the 2021 Staff Climate Survey includes a total of 6,306 staff members from 22 institutions: three community colleges, two public universities, four public four-year colleges, one HBCU, two private universities, four private/nonsectarian four-year colleges, three Catholic four-year colleges, and three other religious four-year colleges.

Staff with Psychological Disorders and COVID-19 Sources of Stress

The COVID-19 pandemic has affected our livelihoods in a myriad of ways. While the COVID-19 virus has infected millions of people, the 2021 SCS data indicates that staff members were more concerned about their mental health than their physical health. For example, 54.6% of staff members stated that their mental health was a large source of stress during the COVID-19 pandemic, compared to only 44.4% that responded similarly regarding their physical health. Along similar lines, 67.5% said that the health of their loved ones was a major concern, demonstrating how staff members seemed to be more concerned about loved ones than themselves. Additionally, about two out of five staff members (40.2%) found that social isolation proved to be a large source of stress. Altogether, it is very evident that mental and physical health were at the forefront of staff members' lives during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Staff members who identified as having a psychological disorder faced higher levels of COVID-related stress than their peers without a psychological disorder. In total, 22.3% of respondents stated that they have a psychological disorder such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD, and more staff members identified as having a psychological disorder than the other conditions on the survey (chronic illness, autism spectrum disorder, etc.). Regarding non-psychological disorders, 6.8% of the sample stated they had attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), 17.7% had chronic illness, 0.5% had autism spectrum disorder, 3.5% had a learning disability, 5.7% had physical or sensory disability, and 6.4% had some type of other disability.

The COVID-19 pandemic has created new concerns around mental health due to a myriad of factors like fear of being infected with the virus, being isolated from others, the



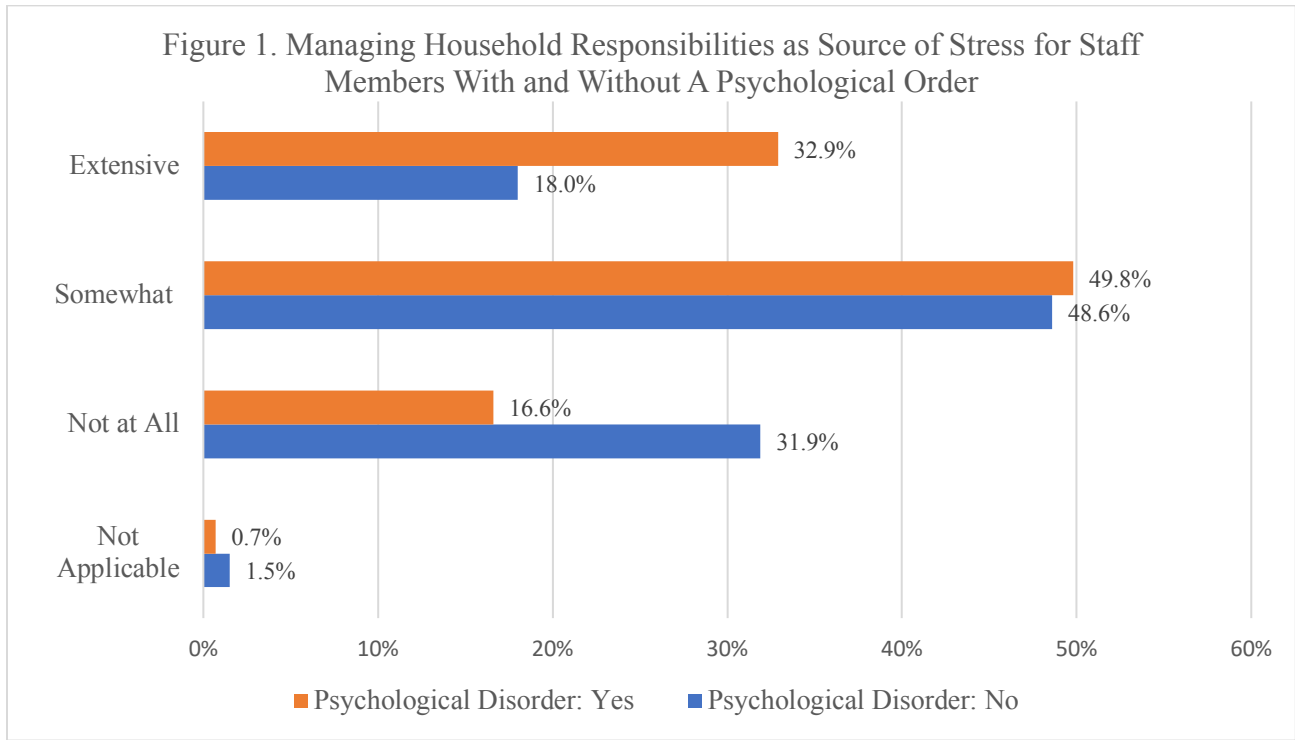
April 2022

constant news cycle on the virus, the fear of being laid off, and more.¹ There have also been several reports that individuals with pre-existing psychological disorders have faced additional mental health struggles during the pandemic.² For those staff who responded to the 2021 Staff Climate Survey, we saw that the large majority of staff members with a psychological disorder found that their mental health was challenged during the COVID-19 pandemic; 82.1% said their mental health was a prominent source of stress. By contrast, this was true for just under half (47.1%) of staff members without a psychological disorder. Additionally, those identifying with a psychological disorder were more likely to consider the health of their loved ones as a source of stress (79.6%) than those who do not identify as having a psychological disorder (63.8%). Finally, the reality of social distancing also proved to be more taxing for staff members with psychological disorders. To paint a better picture, over half (54.5%) of staff members with a psychological disorder reported that social isolation was a sizeable source of stress, and in comparison, only about one-third (36.0%) of staff members without a psychological disorder expressed the same sentiment. Overall, health-related sources of stress were more prominent in staff members with a psychological disorder compared with staff members without a psychological disorder.

In addition, sources of stress not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic were more evident in staff members with a psychological disorder. More specifically, over four out of five staff (82.7%) with a psychological disorder stated that managing their household responsibilities was a source of stress, but this is only true for two out of three (66.6%) staff members without a psychological disorder. This contrast between the two groups was higher than differences for all of the other non-COVID sources of stress asked on this year's survey administration; more details on this particular source of stress can be found in Figure 1. The other major source of stress where staff members differed based on identifying as having a psychological disorder regarded self-imposed high expectations. Again, over four out of five (84.2%) staff members with a psychological disorder found that self-imposed high expectations were particularly stressful, while the respective value for staff members without a psychological disorder equaled 70.6%. Finally, 32.2% of staff members with a psychological disorder reported that discrimination like racism, sexism, etc., created additional mental strain, yet only one out of five (19.9%) without a psychological disorder reported the same. In summary, staff members with a psychological disorder faced considerable sources of stress not unique to the COVID-19 pandemic including discrimination, self-imposed expectations, and household responsibilities.

¹ Kumar, A., & Nayar, K. R. (2021). COVID 19 and its mental health consequences. *Journal of Mental Health, 30*(1), 1-2.

² Neelam, K., Duddu, V., Anyim, N., Neelam, J., & Lewis, S. (2021). Pandemics and pre-existing mental illness: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Brain, behavior, & immunity-health, 10*, 100177.



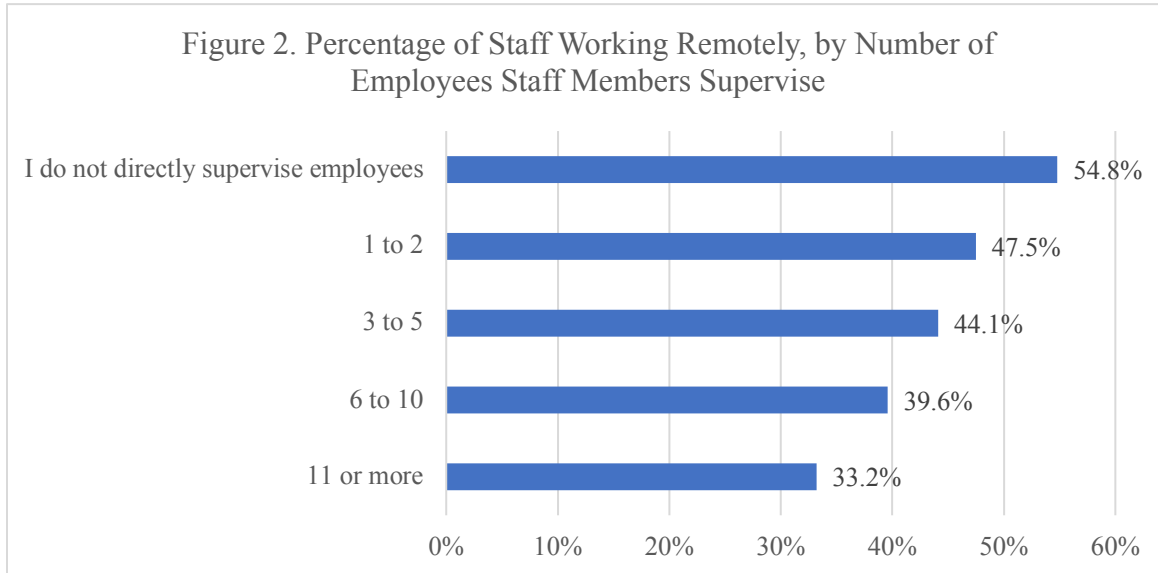
Work Location and Agreement about Job/Campus Decisions

The COVID-19 pandemic altered where many staff members primarily worked. The survey asked where staff members were primarily working at the time they completed the instrument, which was administered between October 10, 2020 and April 30, 2021. About half (50.4%) of staff members were working remotely, 27.7% on campus, and the rest (21.9%) were working about half remotely and half on-campus. It should be noted that certain jobs cannot be performed remotely, so these percentages are influenced by the positions of the staff members who answered the Staff Climate Survey this year. The demographic profile of staff members who work in these three locations tends to differ. Looking only at men and women due to the very small sample sizes for non-binary and genderqueer/gender-non conforming staff, women were more likely to work remotely with 55.3% of women working remotely, while only 40.3% of men worked remotely. The reverse is true for working on campus as almost two out of five (39.5%) men worked on-campus, yet only one out of five (22.2%) women did. There were not any notable differences between men and women working half remotely and half on-campus.

Additionally, 72.9% of staff who worked remotely were salaried, and the remaining 27.1% were hourly, and this difference was also seen regarding those staff who worked half remotely and half on-campus with 72.1% working in both locations being salaried and the remaining 27.9% being hourly. For staff who worked primarily on-campus, about half were salaried (50.9%), and the other half were hourly (49.1%). Finally, looking at the rank of

respondents, both mid-level administrators/managers (associate dean, assistant dean, director) and staff (administrative assistant, analyst, skilled craft workers) worked primarily from home at the same rates. About half (52.4%) of mid-level administrators/managers worked from home, and this is also true of staff as 48.5% of staff primarily worked at home. By contrast, senior administrators (president, chancellor, vice-president, dean) were less likely to work from home with only 41.9% doing so. However, they were more likely to work half on-campus and half remotely; almost 30% (28.5%) of senior administrators stated that they worked in both locations. Mid-level administrators/managers and staff worked in both locations at lower rates, 24.1% and 21.8%, respectively. Regarding working on-campus, mid-level administrators/managers were the least likely with only 23.5% of this group working on campus. In comparison, 29.6% of both senior administrators and staff members stated that they worked primarily on-campus. All in all, it appears that there are several demographic differences between those staff members who worked on-campus, remotely, and a combination of both.

As the number of employees a staff member supervised increased, their likelihood of working remotely decreased; see Figure 2 for a visual representation. For example, 47.5% of staff members who supervised 1 or 2 employees worked remotely, yet only a third (33.2%) of



staff members who supervised many employees (11 or more) worked remotely. The reverse seems to be true regarding staff who worked on-campus; as the number of employees a staff member supervised went up, their likelihood of working on-campus increased. To paint a better picture, 24.4% of staff who did not supervise any employees worked on-campus, yet almost half (46.0%) of the staff who supervised 11 or more worked mostly on-campus. Looking at those staff who worked half remotely and half on-campus, there did not seem to be a



April 2022

difference regarding the likelihood of working in both locations and number of employees a staff member supervised.

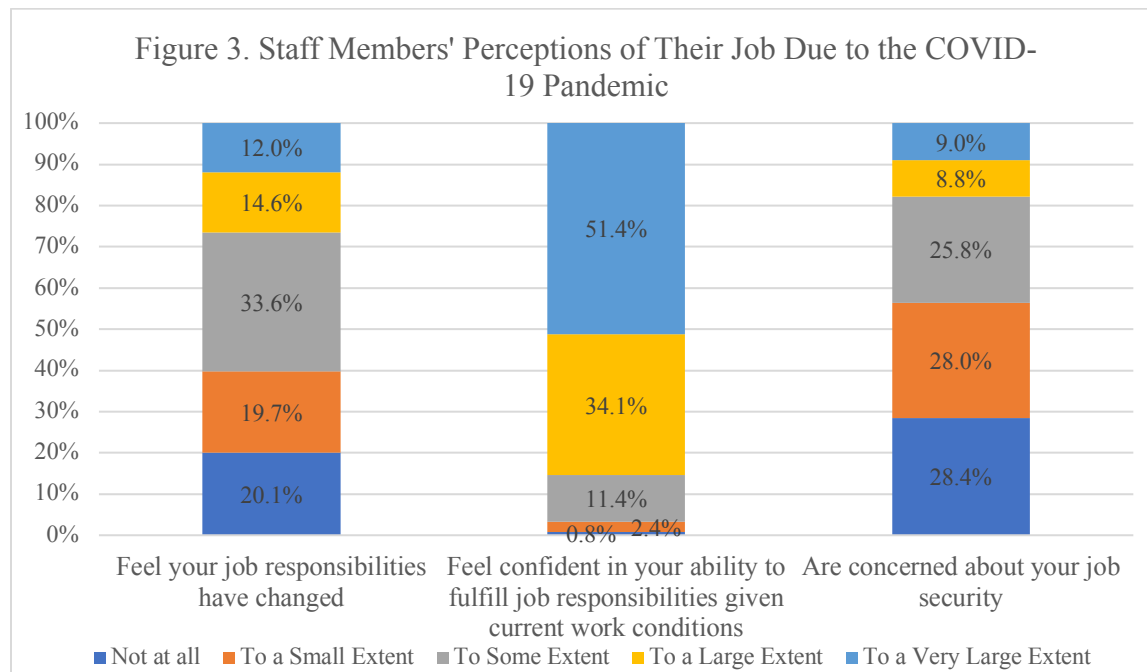
Finally, an interesting point is that remote workers thought at higher rates that their campus was doing a good job dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic in comparison with staff members who worked on-campus and half remotely/half on-campus. To further exemplify this fact, 63.4% of remote workers strongly agreed that their institution's pandemic response considers the health and safety of staff, but this is only true for 47.0% of the staff who worked primarily on-campus. For those who worked both on-campus and remotely, only about half (51.8%) strongly agreed that their institution's pandemic response considers the health and safety of staff. Staff who worked on-campus and half remotely/half on-campus were also less happy with the decisions leaders made regarding in-person operations on campus. Only two out of five (40.1%) staff members who worked on-campus strongly agreed that they support the decisions made about in-person operations and 45.0% of those working both on-campus and remotely strongly agreed. Yet, more remote workers (57.7%) strongly agreed with this sentiment. Finally, staff members who worked remotely, on-campus, and a combination of both had different views of leadership's communication during the pandemic. Nearly three out of five (57.5%) remote workers strongly agreed that campus leadership had communicated effectively during the pandemic, but less than half (48.3%) of on-campus workers and those who worked a combination of remotely and on campus (47.7%) agreed with this statement. Overall, these data points demonstrate how staff who worked on-campus or a combination of on-campus and remotely were more disapproving of the decisions leaders made to safeguard their campus against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Changing Job Perceptions and Job Security

Many staff members perceived their job differently because of the COVID-19 pandemic; three out of five (60.2%) felt at least to some extent that their job responsibilities had changed. To further illustrate this point, some staff members commented on having to adapt to the virtual environment and changing policies and procedures. In addition, a couple staff members also mentioned how they had to take on additional work due to layoffs. Yet, despite these challenges, staff members still were confident in the workplace; almost all (96.9%) responded that they felt confident, at least to some extent, in their ability to fulfill job responsibilities given current conditions. Despite this confidence in their abilities, nearly half of staff members (43.6%) were concerned about their job security. This paradox between feeling confident in one's abilities yet feeling worried about one's job security is certainly interesting and might be due to widespread layoffs in higher education and general uncertainty due to the COVID-19 pandemic.³ Staff might feel like they are competent at their jobs, but they are also aware of the

³ Source: <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2021/12/14/higher-ed-workforce-shrank-4-fall-2020>

ever-changing climate in higher education and the layoffs that have been occurring. In conclusion, the conditions in which staff members worked in the past year during the COVID-19 pandemic certainly impacted how many thought about their job and job responsibilities; please see Figure 3 for more details.



Additionally, staff who were worried about their job security often did not feel that their contributions were valued, which might explain why they were stressed over potentially losing their job. There were wide discrepancies among those staff who strongly believed that their contributions were valued by senior administrators. For those who strongly agreed with this sentiment about their contributions being valued by senior administrators, 72.0% were not worried or only slightly worried about their job security, yet 9.3% who strongly agreed regarding their contributions were very worried about their job security. This finding also carried over to contributions being valued by the department. For staff members who strongly agreed that their contributions were valued by their department, 18.0% were very concerned about their job security, and 69.4% were largely not. How a staff member perceived their direct supervisor also was related to concerns over job security. For those staff members who strongly agreed that their direct supervisor valued their contributions, over half (56.3%) stated that they were only a bit worried about their job security, and 12.6% were very worried. Thus, these findings point to how staff members who did not think their contributions were valued in the workplace had much uneasiness around their job security.

Conclusion



April 2022

The COVID-19 pandemic's effect on higher education has certainly not been limited to just faculty and students. Staff members have also been affected, particularly regarding COVID-19 sources of stress. This is especially true for staff members who identified as having a psychological disorder, and these staff members worried at higher rates than their peers about the health of their loved ones and the tolls of social isolation. Additionally, sources of stress not unique to the pandemic were higher for staff members with a psychological disorder, and the list of stressors includes household responsibilities, self-imposed high expectations, and discrimination. Furthermore, staff members who worked on-campus and half remotely/half on-campus during the pandemic were generally not as satisfied with campus leadership decisions as those staff members who worked primarily remotely. Finally, one characteristic of the staff members who were worried about their job security is that they did not feel like their contributions were valued by senior administrators, their department, and direct supervisors. These findings, overall, demonstrate a need for campuses to better understand the COVID-19 pandemic's impact on staff, including their sources of stress, perceptions of leadership, and concerns over job security.