

Sense of Community Among Staff, Faculty, and Administrators Findings from the HEDS Sense of Community Survey

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HEDS developed the Sense of Community Survey in 2024 after two years of qualitative research on the factors that promote faculty, staff, administrators, and students' sense of community. Since its launch, more than 25,000 people at 54 institutions have completed the survey. This short report summarizes the broader patterns that have emerged across institutions in both our survey and qualitative research on what builds a strong sense of community in staff, faculty, and administrators.

What do we mean by sense of community?

Based on our interviews and survey data, staff, faculty members, and administrators' sense of community includes these four elements:

- A sense that there is a college community, and that they belong to it;
- A sense that the college community both welcomes and supports them;
- Feeling connected to other people at the college, both in their unit and in other units; and
- Believing that the college values their work and values them.

What promotes a sense of community?

People read the interactions they have with others in their office, what they hear in meetings and town halls, their interactions with people in other parts of the college, and the way leaders talk about and manage the college as signals of how much the college supports and values them. Specifically, in the data, we see three drivers of people's sense of community at their college. We list these below in order of their impact:

1. Having one's ideas and concerns taken seriously by colleagues, supervisors, and administrators.
2. Opportunities to participate in events or activities that build community with other people at the college, both in their offices and from departments across the institution.
3. Being treated fairly and with respect by people at the institution.

A notable finding from our interviews and survey data is that administrators have a more positive view of their institutions than staff and faculty. At all institutions, administrators have higher scores on our measures of sense of community: being treated fairly, taken seriously, and having the opportunity to participate in community events than their staff and faculty colleagues.

Why is sense of community important?

Staff, faculty, and administrators who have a stronger sense of community are also more likely to:

- Have people at their institution that they trust and can share their experiences, hopes, and concerns with;
- Believe that their college welcomes all people to be full members of the community regardless of their identity;
- Feel comfortable sharing their beliefs and perspectives with others at their college;
- Feel that they're growing professionally;
- Respect other people, in various roles, at their institution; and
- Believe that the community at their college is working together to fulfill the college's mission.

We've framed the relationships and findings above in a positive light. But, of course, they work in the opposite direction too. When people don't feel that their concerns and ideas are taken seriously by others or they don't feel they have opportunities to join community events, their sense of community is diminished. And that

means they are less likely to believe that their college is a welcoming community, that they are growing professionally, or that people in the college community are working together to enact the college's mission.

Other key takeaways from our research

- I. Overall, people are more likely to feel that they are taken seriously and treated fairly by colleagues who are closer to them in their college's org chart. For example, staff feel they are treated better by colleagues in their offices and their supervisors than they are by people in other offices or by senior administrators. Likewise, faculty feel they are treated better by colleagues in their departments and their department chairs than they are by faculty in other departments, academic administrators, or senior leaders.
- II. The little things count. It's not just important speeches at college-wide events. The way that supervisors, senior administrators, and department chairs interact every day with staff and faculty in meetings, via email, or in casual conversations while waiting in line for coffee impact the sense that staff and faculty have about the extent to which they're valued, their experiences matter, and they're important to the college.
- III. For people who have minoritized identities, being treated with a lack of respect or not having one's ideas and concerns taken seriously by colleagues, supervisors, and administrators not only diminishes their sense of community, but these experiences may also be understood as microaggressions or even discrimination aimed at some aspect of their identity.
- IV. Staff and faculty often wish for more communication and transparency. Senior administrators should work to ensure that the content *and* tone of the messages they ask their direct reports to convey to offices, divisions, and departments across the college are conveyed accurately. Garbled messages to staff and faculty from mid-level spokespeople can have a strong negative impact on people's sense of community.
- V. We noted earlier that administrators have higher scores on our measures of community and the factors that promote community than staff and faculty. This more hopeful view of community may prevent them from fully understanding how much people in other roles on campus are struggling with their sense of community. Additionally, many low- and mid-level staff members, adjuncts, and untenured faculty that we've spoken with are reluctant to tell their more powerful colleagues on campus about what they are experiencing, what their concerns are, and the times when they feel like they've been mistreated. Of course, there are vocal, squeaky wheels at every college, but leaders may not be getting good insights into widespread concerns that are negatively impacting people's sense of community and belonging at their college.
- VI. While there are many upsides to flexible work environments, such as hybrid work and flexible schedules, there may also be the downside of making it more difficult to schedule community events that lots of people can attend. Greater flexibility for individuals can have a negative impact on people's sense of community. Likewise, as offices and departments shrink in response to tighter budgets, many people we've spoken with feel so overwhelmed with work that they cannot take the time to attend community events.