University Staff Advisory Council (USAC)

USAC is a group of dedicated staff members (exempt and nonexempt) who serve in an advisory capacity to Penn State's central administration. Through our advisory capacity, we work collaboratively to create open and equitable deliberations over the policies, procedures, and programming that impact Staff.
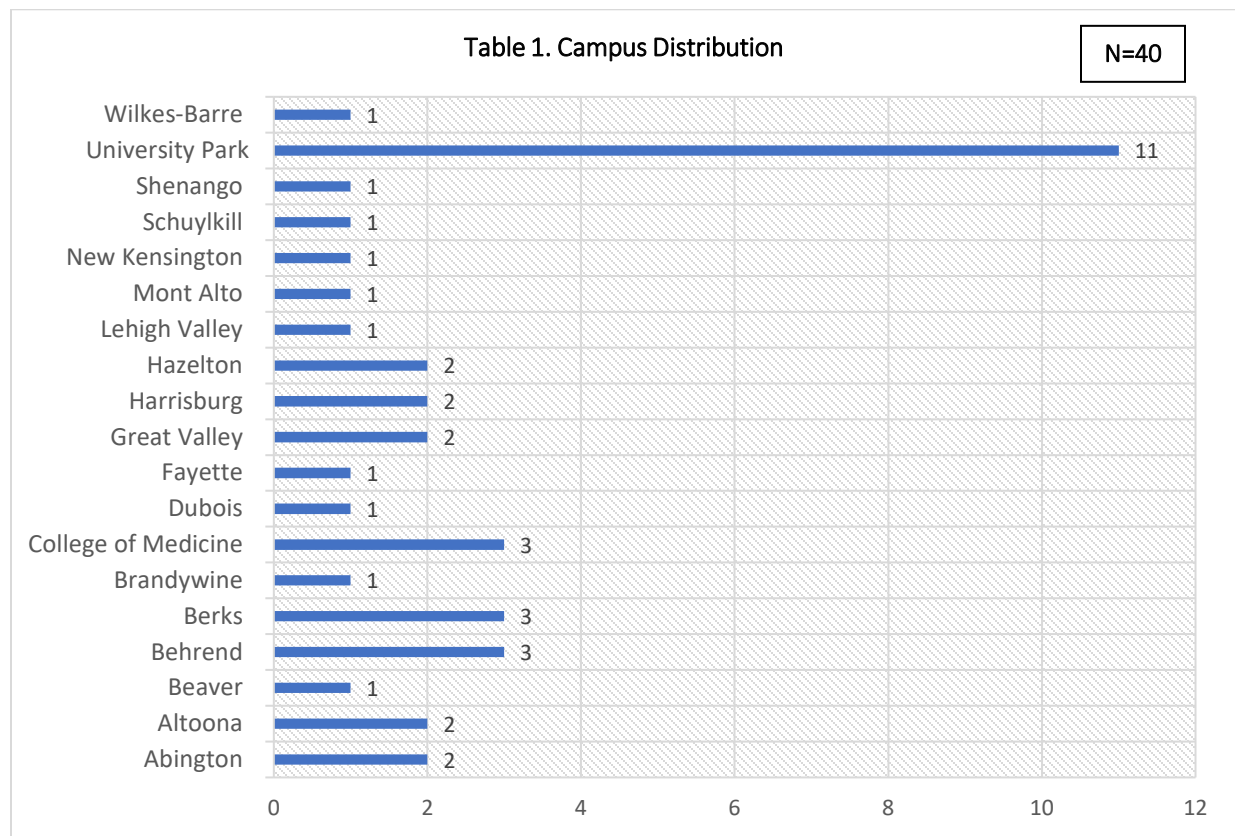
Focus Groups

In November 2023 USAC hosted four virtual focus groups. The purpose of the focus groups was for USAC members to listen and learn about the lived experiences of a subset of staff from across the University. These sessions were intended to dive deeper into the feedback we received during the spring 2023 USAC listening sessions.

Approximately six hundred invitations were sent to staff, and 189 responses were received; participants were selected based on individuals who responded first from their respective campus/college/unit (Table 1). Then, participants were randomized into four groups of ten to create a diverse and representative sample. A trained moderator from USAC led each of the focus groups and USAC members documented participant responses.

The participants were asked the same three questions on topics that surfaced during the Spring 2022 listening sessions. Questions included Faculty & Staff Interactions, Human Resources, and Supervisory/Training. The final question asked participants "If you were President for a day…;" this question was designed to gather information from staff about priority items or "immediate" fixes administrators could implement to improve the overall staff experience.

Table 1. Campus Distribution (N=40)

Campus	Count
Wilkes-Barre	1
University Park	11
Shenango	1
Schuylkill	1
New Kensington	1
Mont Alto	1
Lehigh Valley	1
Hazelton	2
Harrisburg	2
Great Valley	2
Fayette	1
Dubois	1
College of Medicine	3
Brandywine	1
Berks	3
Behrend	3
Beaver	1
Altoona	2
Abington	2

Findings

Faculty and Staff Interactions
Questions Asked

- How would you summarize interactions between faculty and staff at the university?
- For those of you who work closely with faculty, how do you perceive growth opportunities for faculty and staff at Penn State?
- Do you think that Penn State's faculty population is representative of the population at large? What about staff? To what extent do you believe these matters?

Summary of Responses

"From an advising capacity, there are academic procedures with no oversight on the faculty side, which makes staff jobs more challenging. Staff are fixing faculty errors and the overall feeling from the staff is that the faculty attitude is, 'suck it up and deal with it.'"

Overall, the interactions between the faculty and staff were mostly positive, with a few exceptions in some locations. In several instances, the issue of rankism was still present and causing tensions between faculty and staff. There were several comments over the four sessions where staff noted that increased workloads and staff shortages resulted in limited opportunities for social interaction, which hindered collegiality among colleagues.

Examples of positive relations between faculty and staff can be found below.

> *"Feels it's overwhelmingly positive. They usually ask her for resources, speakers, or curriculum items, but they also ask to have financial or life skills added to course catalogs. From her perspective, it's reciprocal and positive."*

> *"I love the relationships the staff and faculty are able to develop. I'm friends outside of [work] with a lot of them now after being here for almost 2 years. I don't feel as though I am lesser than as a staff member. In fact, I feel quite equal to [them], which is great."*

Staff also mentioned the professional development opportunities available to staff and faculty are inequitable. Staff members understand the difference in the types of positions they hold versus faculty and that the requirements for professional growth are different, yet they still feel and see inequity in nearly every unit that was represented. It was noted that, although the Learning Resource Network is a great asset to have and there is a lot of valuable training offered in the system, there are times when more in-depth and in-person opportunities would be appreciated by staff. Staff reported being told, "Professional development is available on the LRN for staff," whereas faculty often have the opportunity to travel to in-person events and activities to learn from their colleagues. Staff perceive that funding is disproportionately available to faculty for professional opportunities, which is tied to the overall unit's financial health.

Staff comments related to professional development:

> *"while professional development is encouraged, staff do not feel that it is reflective of their growth potential/opportunities."*

*"don't see the value in professional development because it historically doesn't lead
to advancement."*

*"many are missing [out] on professional development. Yes, lots available on LRN but as far as
being able to go to—don't have opportunities b/c of money. Budget keeps getting cut so no
money. More open to have opportunities for us. Just be able to go to a one day seminar. Good
for staff morale that we can spend the money on professional development."*

*"[at] my campus, all faculty are provided with some professional development funds that they
can use as they choose. Staff, however, are not and it's really difficult to build that into a budget
as well. So, at my campus, our Chancellor's endowment funds [need to be applied] for if we
want to use for something like professional development that would actually cost something.
Yes, there is the, you know, the LRN, and there are some free resources that Penn State
provides, but anything outside of that, our staff at our campus doesn't have the ability to
access without having the resources to pay for that."*

One participant observed that, at their location, a partnership between their local staff advisory council
and their faculty advisory council has been forged to improve morale across the unit.

Other comments worth sharing:
- "Professional development does not mean career advancement here."
- "We are told by administration we are the backbone of the university but are treated like
scraps."

Supervisory Training Topics
Questions Asked
- What leadership skills and knowledge do you believe your unit/departmental supervisors possess?
What types of training do you feel should be made available to managers/supervisors?
- In what ways does your department allow flexibility and autonomy for you to grow professionally? If
it does not, what would you like to see?

Summary of Responses

*"I am not able to do the things that will support our students because I physically can't do more. The
burnout everyone is feeling ultimately effects the students at the end of the day, and they are why we are
here."*

Participants noted that they observe a lack of training and preparation when faculty or staff transition
into leadership positions. Participants stated the university does not help them navigate leadership
challenges, nor do they teach them how to be good mentors or mentees. It was suggested that the
university implement the practice of 360° evaluations and feedback to help subordinates provide
feedback so that new leaders can better navigate the inevitable challenges they will face. It was noted
that while the LRN has training, it does not sufficiently fill the need for leadership training.

Participants shared that the lack of training is compounded when leaders are not equipped with the
tools to help them have difficult conversations with their staff. Rather than correcting problematic
behaviors when they occur, leaders tend to create "blank policies" that impact everyone, and those can
have a negative impact on morale overall.

> *"There is nothing offered on [overseeing budgets]." She wanted some clear budget training, a "watchdog" way to oversee it, a list of people who are good to know when managing budgets, standards for administrators of budgets, and a level of transparency. "Minimum standards or best practices could be useful for how internal budgets are run and managed if you're not part of the financial team for your college or unit."*

Transparency remains a strong concern for university staff members. Direct reports expressed a need to hear more about what is going on from their supervisors, even if the message is, "We aren't sure yet." Participants shared examples of hearing information about university news from other units, social media, or news outlets rather than supervisors or unit leadership. A participant also stated that some staff who have been promoted into supervisory roles use their position as "power" and seem to withhold information from those who rely on the information to perform their job well.

> *"I think supervisors and managers need to understand that their direct reports would love to have transparency [about] what's going on [around] the campus. Not necessarily all the details of things that are going on, but just a little bit of insight into what's going on and not having to hear it from other campuses or social media posts or the day before something's going to happen."*

> *"in general, I would say most of the time decisions are made from the top without a lot of input from the bottom."*

There was a general sense that supervisors are so far removed from processes of day-to-day work that they are unable to make appropriate decisions about the redistribution of workloads because individual job responsibilities are unknown to leaders. Participants encouraged decision-makers to include staff members in conversations about decision making, which they note will help to foster inclusion. Staff expressed a desire to feel empowered and respected rather than feeling like things are done to them without any input.

When asked if they felt supported, several participants responded by saying they felt supported by their immediate supervisor but not by supervisors above that level. It was also stated that the immediate supervisor is essentially "powerless" to provide the right support or assistance in most cases. There was a consensus that middle management is where workflows, processes, etc. seem to get backed up.

Human Resources

Questions Asked

- Tell us about your observation and experience of Penn State hiring practices.
- Discuss the effectiveness of the performance review process at Penn State.
- Do you feel that workload is distributed equitably?
- Where or from whom do staff seek support/advocacy? And how beneficial are advocacy efforts?

Summary of Responses

> *"When I first started, an HR rep was in our building, so I could go and ask questions. I understand and appreciate the HR transformation, but it's hard to get answers to questions, and people seem unavailable or unwilling to help."*

There were robust conversations in most of the groups regarding the review process. In most cases, the process is viewed as a waste of time with nothing meaningful coming from it.

One participant noted that they came in as a manager but was given very little training and needed to rely on their previous experience. Re: performance reviews, there was very little guidance on policy and a lot of hearsay related to "we don't give exceptionals, even if everyone is exceptional.

Another participant indicated "they have been instructed not to give exceptionals as well. They stated, "it seems most managers are told this as a "best practice." They noted that was abrasive and again, not official policy, but when something becomes such a narrative, people quote it as "policy."

Staff were frustrated that raises were historically tied to these reviews yet felt supervisors put little to no effort into providing valuable feedback. Participants also mentioned a desire for supervisors to provide more support in identifying growth opportunities. Additionally, it was pointed out that there is no recognition or value placed on staff service contributions to the university, and that is disappointing. Staff noted the lack of recognition discourages them from contributing in a meaningful way.

"I had colleagues in other units and departments. They gave them 5 no matter what, because they wanted to help their folks out and make sure that they got the most out of GSI, so I definitely think it's useless. I used to spend days and days on my review, not any more."

"And managers end up trying to game the system too because they are the ones who are trying to look out for you, they'll be like, "well, I don't want to rank you too highly this year because we don't have the budget to really give you an increase this year."

The hiring process discussion in each group yielded similar conclusions. There was frustration regarding the hiring freeze, and staff indicated they would like an update on the process/progress. Participants expressed frustration that the process to post positions has been held up, sometimes for weeks, while waiting for approvals to happen.

"My experience is that the HR office is too slow. Approving and, getting an ad posted."

"it'd be nice if they would have told us things like that sooner so we didn't invest all this time and waste the person's time and sort of dash their hopes and give them a bad impression of Penn State, you know, that I didn't like doing that as someone who was on the committee and I didn't like experiencing it either."

"I've been on couple search committees – it takes forever to hire somebody even once they are in the system. Getting everyone together as a search committee is difficult because we are all wearing several hats. To review applicants, then again to interview… I hired someone who has been here for nine years about took them four months to get hired. There is a lot of go through and get hired at Penn State; the process gets in the way and the need for streamlining."

The hiring process is viewed as cumbersome, burdensome, and frustrating. It was unclear why the hiring process is the same for full-time staff members as it is for part-time staff when the functions of their jobs are often different. It was also pointed out that, because of the nature of the current process, it is taking

too much time to move people from "review" to "offer" to "hire." As a result, staff have experienced a loss of viable candidates for positions.

> *"The other problem that's I guess a university policy issue is the unwillingness to provide overlap between a staff person who's leaving and a new one who's being hired into that position, you don't get to train your replacement."*

One participant noted a question on the Workday application about contacting a candidate's current supervisor. They were concerned the question could cause issues within the current unit if the manager does not know the employee is looking for alternative employment, especially if the manager is the reason a person may be looking for a different job. They noted "yes/no" option does not give candidates the opportunity to give details about why they might select "no," and worried that selecting "no" is looked upon unfavorably by search committees.

Additionally, staff shared that there is not currently a process for rehiring a part time employee who takes a leave of absence. Participants noted it would be helpful if there was a way supervisors could go into the system and "pause" employment to save on time and energy spent rehiring.

> *"To switch from County [employee] to Penn State [employee], they made me reapply for my same position. I had to re-interview, they had to re-advertise it, everything just for me to keep my position. And my, I don't even know what he was technically, hiring manger maybe, well. If we do get a more qualified individual, I guess that means that you may not get [the job.] And I was like, oh. I thought this was my, you know, my move, my promotion. He's like, oh, I don't know about that. To go through the whole process again, I think it's such a waste of time. And money because you have to pay to have it advertised. And you're not only wasting your employees time, but everybody that is interviewing for that position. It's so archaic."*

Comments were made regarding the usefulness and effectiveness of search committees. Participants said there is no oversight on the committees to avoid biases. Also, it was noted that when staff or committees provide meaningful feedback about candidates, it can be disregarded by the decision-making authority, so staff feel disenfranchised about being included in the hiring process.

Participants also talked about diversity, equity, and inclusion processes related to hiring staff positions. They felt that until units can sponsor visas for staff positions, rather than solely relying on the local talent pool, there is little that can be done to create a diverse staff.

The lack of staffing is reaching critical levels in some units. Employees expressed concern about their ability to take on more work to cover for the coworkers who may have left their unit, especially for little to no additional compensation. Some units mentioned that it is difficult for people to take time off during recruiting seasons or other mission-critical times and that the staffing crisis is making it even harder. As a result, people are losing vacation time back to the university.

Staff mentioned on several occasions that they were grateful for the extra day at Thanksgiving in 2023, but the announcement came too late for some to adjust scheduling or travel plans. Some staff lost a day of vacation because they were unable to adjust their vacation time to not lose it. Additionally, some part-time employees lost an entire day of pay with little notice.

One campus shared that they have implemented bi-monthly wellness days that allow for no meetings to be scheduled so that staff can focus on professional development growth and learning. This has been a

tremendous relief to their people as it allows them to grow, train, and get caught up on their work, but it is sometimes a struggle "to make it work" because of the staffing shortages they are facing and needing to find office coverage while they are "out."

President for the Day...
Question Asked:
Imagine you are the president of the university for a day, based on what you have experienced or seen in your units and campus, what are some things that you would change to make the university a better space for you and your colleagues?

Summary of Responses

"It would be great to enact an open-door policy where staff can have their voices, suggestions, and concerns heard. The perception is that Deans/Chancellors/DAAs, are unavailable or 'too busy.'"

This question was asked to get a better understanding of staff perspectives on where there may be systemic concerns, process improvement suggestions, employee recognition ideas, etc., and to gather ideas on the University could address some of these challenges. Most of the comments made across all four groups were tied to morale, salaries, red tape, and recognition/appreciation. There was a sense that the University needs to tend more to the most basic human needs-- currently, staff are struggling to pay bills, and many are working multiple jobs. This is having an adverse effect on morale, overall happiness/job satisfaction, and commitment to the institution. While making institutional changes to remain competitive, it is important to address these basic human needs.

Overwhelmingly, there was a reported sense of isolation around this question. It is no secret that low motivation, low salaries, and a lack of communication are some of the biggest issues negatively affecting staff. There was acknowledgement that, "Money is nice, but it won't solve everything," but it was also stated that staff want to be heard. One respondent said, "Staff make up the majority of the employees; if we walked out, it would be a huge issue!"

Also, every group commented that there is too much "red tape," which makes it difficult for staff to do their jobs. With already strained resources, participants shared these bureaucratic procedures inhibit their ability to work efficiently.

Many staff mentioned the extra time off around the winter break last year and this year at Thanksgiving. They encouraged administration to continue such good will gestures. However, there was concern about workers who are classified as "essential." Staff questioned whether or not these employees receive additional time.

Many groups commented that the university is too "top heavy" and/or that middle management feels "bloated"; they said if they were the president for the day, they would look at cutting positions at that level.

Recommendations
One recommendation would be to create Staff Advisory Councils across all Commonwealth Campus locations and units at University Park. Implementation of this plan requires "buy-in" from deans, chancellors, and unit leadership to be successful. These leaders need to understand that local SACs can help them troubleshoot issues, source ideas, implement change, and assist with dissemination of information. The staff serving on SACs need to be actively engaged in the shared governance process at

their location so they are not viewed as "the party planning committee." The integration of staff members in the shared governance process would help create networks among staff, both within and across units. More local SACs would help staff to create avenues for change at the local and university level. This could help increase morale and decrease the sense of isolationism that staff mentioned during these sessions. These local SACs would provide staff members with representation at "the table" and a give them a voice in the processes that affect their day-to-day work.

Another recommendation is to implement a centralized pool of professional development funding for staff. The current structure for professional development funding varies by unit, which results in a feeling of "the haves and the have-nots." This structure makes staff feel as though their professional development is not as important as the development of faculty or that they are not "worth it" because of the type of job they hold. If the new compensation model intends to increase job promotion from within, then we need to invest in the professional development process. This would allow all employees, at all locations, the opportunity to apply for funding so they can continue to grow and stay within the university system.

Staff members mentioned the difficulty of using vacation time before they hit "use it or lose it." While we recognize the importance of taking time away from work, sometimes there are staffing constraints that make this difficult. The university could consider permitting staff to sell back some of their time rather than losing it if their vacation bank is near the cut-off point.

The final recommendation would be to continue to increase the levels of communication and transparency both from the central administration and within the units about the changes and challenges the university is facing. The Penn State Today email can no longer serve as the sole source of information. Staff members crave inclusion and community. They want to hear from leadership, at all levels, so expanded communication will contribute to that. Administration, staff and faculty must work at being creative and getting messages to all members of the Penn State community because leaving it up to the units to disseminate the message seems to have led to one of three things happening:

1. The message gets sent to the units in its original form from central administration, in the time and manner in which it was intended.
2. The message from central administration is diluted and/or redacted; or
3. The message does not get disseminated to staff and faculty members.

Staff members across the university system have proven they have ideas for change and want to be included in decision making. They want to feel like they are part of something bigger than themselves. This is evident in the number of staff members who have shown up at the USAC Listening Sessions and the response rate for inclusion in our focus groups. It would behoove the administration to accept staff's willingness to help and include them as part of the process.