APPENDIX C

REPORT OF FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSIONS
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Executive Summary of Focus Group Discussions

Overview

This assessment of the work-life experiences of employees at Missouri State University was conducted during the Spring of 2008 at the request of the Work-Life Committee. The project described here is qualitative in nature and is part of an overall assessment that began with a campus-wide survey of employees in July 2007. The purpose of the survey was to gather information concerning the degree to which University employees experienced conflict in managing their work and non-work responsibilities, and to gain a better understanding of the benefits that assist employees in managing the conflicts between their professional and personal lives more effectively. Results of the survey suggested a need to gather more detailed information about employees’ perceived work-life balance and the issues impacting that balance and to understand more fully how and in what ways the benefits identified by survey respondents eased the conflicts experienced in achieving a positive balance between work and non-work responsibilities. To gain this additional understanding of employees’ experiences, a focus group study was commissioned by the Work-Life Committee. Dr Charlene Berquist, Department of Communication, volunteered to design and conduct the focus group study. Assisting were graduate students enrolled in Dr. Berquist’s qualitative research methods course. Focus groups with staff, faculty, and administrators were conducted in April and May, 2008. The complete assessment of data and final report was completed in November 2008.

Key Findings

What follows is a brief summary of the relevant findings from data generated in the focus group interviews. Details about the methodology and an expanded explanation and discussion of the findings of this study can be found in the report, which follows the executive summary. Examples of the focus group questions, informed consent documents, and demographics can be found in the appendices.

Major Barriers to Achieving Balance

- Culture

Employees perceive a University culture that is generally not conducive to a positive work-life balance. Many interviewees describe a disconnect between the rhetoric of the institution—rhetoric that espouses values of collaboration and caring and that encourages work-life balance—and specific policies, benefits, and expectations that contradict this rhetoric and do not support work-life balance. Employees at all levels of the institution (staff, faculty, and administrators) report that multiple cultures exist on campus in regards to work-life balance. Many interviewees report that their departments or units have policies that are very supportive in helping them to balance their work and personal life and exceed those prescribed by the University. However, many other employees describe situations where supervisors do not interpret University policies in ways that allow for any flexibility in adapting to or balancing work and family demands.
• **Change**

The rapid pace of change was in issue of concern to all employees and a major barrier in achieving work-life balance. Interviewees acknowledged the need for change and expressed appreciation for administrative leadership in bringing about change. However, nearly all employees report that the rapid pace of change in recent years, and in some instances the unfocused nature of that change, has outstripped their ability to integrate changes appropriately and effectively. Interviewees expressed concern that the administration often undertook change without seeking input from those directly involved in and impacted by the change. Furthermore, the changes were often not communicated clearly or were communicated prematurely, before processes and procedures had been finalized. Interviewees described this rapid change as having several negative by-products, including the following: 1) implementation of policies that are counterproductive to the University’s stated values and goals; 2) redirecting energy away from the University’s central focus on students; 3) significantly increasing the workload and stress levels of employees; 4) lowering both productivity and the quality of work produced; and 5) lessening the ability of employees at all levels of the organization to achieve balance.

• **Supervisors**

There was significant variation across departments at the University in the way that supervisors interpreted University policies related to work-life balance and in their willingness to allow employees to take advantage of benefits such as flexibility in work schedules. Effective and flexible supervisors were described by many participants as being a central factor in determining the work-life culture of a unit, and in influencing their ability to achieve a positive balance in managing the demands of work and home. Although many employees reported that their supervisors made significant efforts to keep workloads manageable and were flexible and supportive when they needed time to take care of a personal issue, others described supervisors who were quite insensitive to employees’ work-life balance challenges. For example, it was not uncommon for employees to note that some supervisors make it difficult to use existing benefits such as limited flextime options or wellness activities. Employees noticed these differences in how supervisors handled benefits, particularly flextime benefits, and those who were unable to take advantages of benefits feel frustrated and excluded.

• **Workload**

Employees at all levels of the organization report experiencing significant increases in workload demands and the requirement to do more with fewer resources (e.g., budget and staff). Increased workloads require many employees to work longer hours, to work at home, to work on the weekends, and to not take full advantage of accrued vacation time. The work overload for employees reduces the time they spend with their families and reduces the time they have available to take care of personal responsibilities. Many employees say that if they do not work long hours, they fear they will not be viewed as committed employees.

• **Staffing**
Employees report that increased workload demands are further exacerbated by the fact that many units are short-staffed and unable, because of financial constraints or a lack of administration approval, to hire additional staff to support expanded workloads. There was also frustration that in some areas there was an overabundance of staff while in other areas there exist severe staff shortages and these inequities were not addressed. Further it was noted that some staff positions were able to be hired in short time frames (2-3 weeks) while in other areas it took several months to hire staff.

*Merit and Evaluation Processes*

Focus group participants acknowledged the importance and necessity of evaluating employees at all levels of the institution. However, nearly all interviewees described the current merit and evaluation system as flawed and believed that in its present form it is detrimental to the cooperative and collaborative environment that previously existed within many departments and between departments and their respective colleges. Employees feel that they are in competition with their colleagues for monetary incentives. This competition makes them less likely to engage in collegial behavior and increases the strain they feel at work. In order to compete, employees have increased the amount of work they do, including the amount of work they do when they are at home to the detriment of their home life and work-life balance.

*Technology*

For participants, technology was a double-edged sword: on the one hand it provides opportunities for flexibility, while on the other it intrudes on already limited time at home as many employees are on-call during evenings and weekends. While technology provides more opportunities to telecommute, employees indicate that most work units do not utilize opportunities to telecommute, and employees who do work from home expressed that they often felt that they were “suspect” and that their supervisors and fellow employees questioned whether they were actually working. Many employees expressed a desire for expanded telecommuting opportunities.

*Communication*

Examples of communication breakdowns and the perceived unwillingness of many administrators to listen were a common thread throughout the focus group interviews. Many participants talked about the challenges that a lack of communication creates for them, particularly the perceived unwillingness or inability to listen on the part of “higher ups.” The implications of this lack of communication were that employees at every level feel disenfranchised and not connected to decision making. Employees also explained that inadequate communication also created stress and additional work because oftentimes the initial communication about a policy or procedure was inaccurate and was changed multiple times before finally being clarified.
• Respect and Recognition

The desire for respect and recognition was an expressed need by all employees. Many participants indicated they felt their knowledge and experience were not valued or sought out by the administration, and that when they did express their opinions and concerns that this feedback was often not listened to or acknowledged. The recognition for good work was noted by many as lacking and the need to celebrate good work through a wide range of awards for all employees was identified by many as important in achieving a positive work-life balance.

Monetary and Non-Monetary Benefits Helpful in Achieving Balance

Focus group participants described a number of benefits that the University provides that are particularly helpful to them in achieving a positive work-life balance. Some of these benefits include the paid vacation between Christmas and New Years, limited flextime availability, and wellness opportunities. However, many interviewees explained that they, or others they knew, were not able to take advantage of many of these benefits—either because supervisors did not allow the benefit to be fully utilized (e.g., flextime) or because the type of work performed by their unit prevented them from utilizing the benefit. One of the most-frequently repeated concerns expressed by employees in regards to benefits was the importance of assuring that all employees were afforded equal access to all available benefits and that access not be limited by a supervisor’s narrow interpretations of a benefit’s availability or by the nature of one’s work.

Interviewees also acknowledged that one’s personal circumstances often dictated how helpful benefits were in reducing the challenges inherent in balancing work and family expectations. So, while affordable child care might be particularly important for employees with young children, this benefit does little to assist the employee who is caring for an elderly parent. Similarly the tuition-waiver benefit, while extremely beneficial for employees who wish to continue their education or for those who have college-age children, is of limited value to employees without children or for those whose children are grown. For this reason, many employees suggested what was best described by one interviewee as “a cafeteria of benefits.” In other words, employees would be given a list of benefit options and monetary guidelines for total benefits. They would then be allowed to choose the package of benefit options most relevant for their circumstances.

Data from focus group interviews revealed a number of benefits, some requiring funds to implement and some that could be implemented without a significant expenditure of funds, that employees believed would be helpful in assisting them to achieving a more positive work-life balance. The types of benefits discussed and the manner in which these benefits would be helpful were relatively consistent across focus groups. Below is a list of the most commonly cited benefits, in order of importance, that employees identified as ones that would be most helpful to them in managing work and family obligations effectively.

Monetary Benefits
• Expansion of Course Fee Waivers
• Employee Assistance Program
• Adequate and Affordable Health Care Benefits
• Short-Term Family Leave and Disability Benefits
• Expanded and Formalized Flextime Options
• Adequate Salaries
• Accessible Affordable Child and Adult Care
• Partner Benefits

Non-Monetary Benefits
• Enhanced Communication
• Supervisor Training and Consistency
• Respect and Appreciation of Work Contributions
• Accessible and Confidential Grievance Structures
Report

Introduction
This study focused on employee perceptions about and experiences of work-life balance as well as employee perceptions of the University’s culture, policies, and benefits related to achieving work-life balance. The report is divided into two major sections: a detailed description of the methodology, and an explanation of Key Findings along with excerpts from focus group interviews that reflect and elucidate these findings. The Methodology describes the rationale and design of the focus group project as well as a more detailed explanation of participants and the questions asked of participants during focus groups. The Key Findings summarizes and synthesizes data gleaned from the focus groups in three major areas. First is a distillation of the participants’ views and experiences of work-life balance at the University. Second is an explanation of what employees believe are the major barriers to achieving work-life balance. And, third is a detailed explanation of the benefits, both monetary and non-monetary, that participants believe would strengthen their ability to manage work and non-work responsibilities more effectively.

Methodology
This section explains the methods used to elicit employees’ work-life experiences. Qualitative methods such as focus groups are “intended to provide researchers with means for collecting data that can be used to construct a descriptive account of the phenomena being investigated” (Dollar & Merrigan, 2002, p. 6). Qualitative approaches such as focus groups are particularly useful because they allow a researcher to uncover people’s subjective attitudes and experiences that are typically inaccessible through other means of research (Krueger & Casey, 2000). For example, an individual might indicate on a survey that she/he experiences significant work-life conflict. This is important to know; however, what the survey data does not provide is information about why and in what ways the individual experiences those work-life challenges. Focus groups also tap into subjective experiences and are an efficient way to collect large amounts of data that describes, compares, or explains a social phenomenon (Fink, 2006) because they allow participants to interact with one another and build on one another’s comments, and they allow the facilitators to probe for details.

Participants and Procedures
Focus groups were held during April and May, 2008. A total of twenty-five focus groups were conducted. Groups ranged in size from three to fourteen participants each and lasted from 60 to 105 minutes. A total of 224 employees participated in focus groups. Each focus group was homogenous in that it represented one employee type. Employees represented in focus groups included academic and non-academic administrators (6 groups), tenured faculty (5 groups), tenure-track faculty (4 groups), non-tenure track faculty (1 group), staff-clerical (4 groups), and staff-support (5 groups). Three additional single-person and two-person interviews were conducted with individuals who wanted to participate in discussions but were unable to attend during scheduled focus group times.

Using an open-ended interview protocol to guide discussion, Dr. Berquist facilitated the focus groups with the assistance of graduate students in her advanced qualitative research methods course. Interview
questions (see Appendix E) were developed with direction and input from the Work-Life Committee and were designed to cover a range of work-life issues and address specific questions and issues raised in initial survey results. Informed-consent procedures were explained at the beginning of each focus group and after distributing the consent forms (see Appendix D). All focus group discussions were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. The anonymity of participants in the focus groups is protected in this report, and in some instances the use of “they” or “their” as the first person singular pronoun has been chosen to further protect the identity of participants and to illustrate how their statements are representative of many focus group participants.

Data Analysis

Focus group interview tape-recordings were transcribed and went through several phases of analysis. A preliminary analysis was conducted in order to get a general sense of the data and reflect on its meaning. Next, a more detailed analysis was performed and data was divided into segments or units that reflected specific thoughts, attitudes, and experiences of participants. At the conclusion of this process of analysis a list of topics was generated, and the topics were compiled into categories that were labeled as key findings. Data from across all focus groups was again analyzed so it could be organized into these categories. Then these categories or key findings were analyzed to determine the interconnectedness of issues and conditions that may have given rise to the categories. Ultimately, a picture of the work-life experiences of employees emerged. Data from all employee groups was analyzed for major themes, and data from each participant group was also analyzed separately to determine trends unique to each group.

It is important to note that the major work-life issues identified in this document and discussed below emerged in all focus groups and were raised by employees at all levels of the institution (staff, faculty, and administrators). Additionally, there were high levels of agreement about these issues and significant consistency in how the issues were talked about among groups. In instances where an issue was addressed by all groups but talked about differently by different groups, these differences in talk are identified and explained. So, for example, salaries were discussed in nearly all focus groups and by participants at all levels of the organization. The importance of salary as a barrier in achieving work-life balance differed among groups—these differences in talk are highlighted and explained.

Key Findings

Analysis of focus group interview transcripts revealed a number of key findings related to employees’ experiences of work-life balance. These findings include 1) how employees defined work-life balance generally and descriptions of their own experiences of managing work-life balance, 2) perceptions of the University’s culture and the ways in which this culture influences work-life dynamics, 3) perceived barriers to managing work-life balance effectively, and 4) monetary as well as non-monetary benefits that employees believe would be most helpful in achieving a positive balance in managing one’s work life and family life. These findings are elaborated below. Discussion of each key finding begins with a bulleted list of the major themes that were reflected in focus groups discussions about the key finding and a brief summary of the findings. This is followed by an expanded description of employee narratives about their perceptions and experiences. Excerpts from focus group discussions and the actual words used by participants are integrated into these narratives to provide the reader with a greater understanding and
appreciation of the ways in which work-life issues were experienced, understood, and talked about by participants.

It is important to emphasize that when a direct quote from a focus group participant is used, this is not a random choice. Quotes were selected that represent the views expressed by a majority of participants. So, while focus group participants may have stated their experiences and opinions in different words, the excerpt used to illustrate the point best represents the experiences expressed by many or all participants. The value of these excerpts and narratives in understanding the experiences of participants is underscored by Lindloff (1995) who explains that “if we want to know how something is done and what it means [to people], we have to know how it is talked about” (p. 234). What follows is an extended description of the key findings of this study.

**Key Finding 1: Descriptions of Balance**

- Overall perception that a work-life balance does not exist
- Balance is influenced by work demands
- Balance is influenced by personal circumstances
- Achieving balance becomes more challenging over time
- Supervisors responsibility for managing balance for their employees is challenging
- Despite challenges, employees express loyalty and commitment

Focus groups participants were asked to first talk about what work-life balance meant to them, how they defined balance, and the extent to which they were successful in achieving a positive balance between work and home responsibilities. Nearly all participants, with the exception of clerical staff, described achieving positive work-life balance as challenging. On a scale of 1-10, with 1 being completely “out of balance” and 10 reflecting a high degree of work-life balance, the majority (72%) of participants from across faculty, administrative, and staff support focus groups described themselves as a 5 or below. Many individuals described the balance of work and home responsibilities as “...a broken scale” and explained that achieving an acceptable balance between the competing responsibilities of work and home was “a constant juggling act.” Only a very few individuals (3 or 4 at most, and all of whom had come to University life from high pressure external positions) expressed a different point of view. One participant offered a statement that was representative of the comments of many focus group participants; this statement sums up the challenges of managing work-life balance at the University and the perception that upper administration is neither aware of nor able to address the problem adequately:

I don’t see the University as having any positive work-life balance. I don’t think the administration has a clue what this would be for the University as a whole, that people would feel uniformly across the organization that there is support for them personally, for family issues, that there is support for and recognition for doing extra work…

Staff, faculty, and administrators alike noted that the consuming nature of University work often blurs the boundaries between work and home, and they explained that this fact makes finding a balance between
the competing responsibilities of both nearly impossible. This was especially true for faculty and for many support staff and administrators. As one faculty member explained, “I think I wonder what that means sometimes, because our jobs are not strictly defined as 8 to 5 jobs, and so balance is hard to find.” Support staff and administrators also described schedules and responsibilities that created barriers to achieving balance and many explained that the expectations for them to work nights and weekends were commonplace in their positions. As one staff expressed, referring to the consuming nature of the work, “That’s fine if you do not have any interests or hobbies and honestly I love my job but I have other interests and things I would like to do and I think that having time to do these things makes me more balanced and a better employee.” In one focus group session, a participant placed his Blackberry on the table and said “This is why I have no balance in my life” and then went on to explain, as did many other participants in staff and administrative positions, that he often worked nights and weekends without the flexibility to take the time worked beyond fifty or sixty hours per week as comp time (because of workload demands, staff shortages, and the expectations of higher-ups). It was not uncommon for participants, particularly those in staff and administrative roles, to report being on call during evenings and weekends; because of this they found it difficult to carve out “down time” that was totally separate from the University and work responsibilities.

Because of the consuming nature of staff and faculty work, many participants described a sense of “anxiety” about their work and expressed concerns that it was challenging to find balance because they were “never able to catch up.” A number of employees at every level said that it is often hard to enjoy time at home because of workload demands. Many explained that with workload expectations and the structure of the new merit and evaluation system they never feel as though they have done enough to “relax and give myself permission to read a book”…or “enjoy a day gardening” or “just play with my cat.” These feelings of frustration, anxiety, and tension are summed up in the words of one participant who explained:

When I go home at night, I’m pretty sure I did everything I needed to, but I also worry about the next day. And that doesn’t ever leave my mind. And maybe I have an anxiety disorder or something, but I worry myself sick, almost to the point of being physically ill about what needs to be done and whether I can get it all done. And then you add on top of that merit. I feel like I could work myself sick and still come out at a 4 [referring to the University merit system ratings]…And I think at the University we’re all being pushed and expected to do more than is possible…add merit on top of that and it just creates such a competitive atmosphere that I feel like it becomes almost impossible to have balance, because you’re always striving to do more and to be better. Is there balance? If you define it according to emotional state, overwork and worry, no.

The discourse of participants also acknowledged that personal circumstances and family life-span issues influence, to some degree, employees’ ability to achieve a positive balance between work and family life. Interviewees explained that finding balance between one’s work and life responsibilities often fluctuates over time and is impacted not just by one’s position and job responsibilities at the University, but also by one’s family obligations such as care giving responsibilities for young children, aging parents, and ill

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family members. One participant, in response to being asked about work-life balance, explained that her personal circumstances, particularly the fact that her children were grown, had a dramatic impact on her work-life balance, “I don’t have to worry about being there to get them to this or picking them up from that, and that kind of thing, so that has made a huge impact on my work-life environment but I really feel for the people here with young kids—this is not always a family friendly place.” These comments are echoed by a department head who expressed the concerns of many others when they spoke both about the challenges of faculty with children but also about the University’s ability to retain faculty in light of these challenges, “I don’t know how people with kids do this job. I worry about that, especially when we have new faculty members [with children] coming in this fall and I wonder about whether we will be able to keep them…”

Consistent with the concerns expressed by the participants above, employees with children at every level of the institution expressed significant challenges in regards to balancing the demands of parenting with work expectations. As one single parent explained:

I’m a single parent, I have two little kids. And then there’s my work. And there are times, most of the time, I’m just going nuts because I’ll get a call from the school, my child is not well but I have a class to teach and committees to do. Like others here have said, there’s no real evening off or weekend off. It’s either stress from work or home or both at the same time. So I don’t see balance. I made the choice to do this job. I have to work, and I enjoy the work. But I do not have balance.

The parent above went on to express a view that was shared by participants with and without children: that if child care on campus was affordable or available for extended hours and during vacations, and if the laboratory school was affordable or if employees’ tuition credits could be applied to child care or to Greenwood laboratory school, or if employees at lower pay scales could receive reduced rates for summer programs like Camp Bear, these benefits would ease considerably the family-work balancing act that many employees face and find challenging.

When talking about the difficulties of balancing work and family demands, the challenges faced and described by participants were not limited to those with children. Many participants described their challenges in balancing work responsibilities with the need to take care of aging parents and ill family members. Many employees facing these types of family challenges described their work units and supervisors as being very supportive but explained as well that many of the University’s policies were not structured in ways that allowed them to manage these family challenges while also being effective employees. Throughout these narratives, participants noted that a re-examination and expansion of flexible work structures, as well as expanded family leave options, would not only benefit employees but the University as well. A staff member explains:

We have lost some very, very valuable employees. And not just their skills but their knowledge and experience in our unit because we have not been flexible or accommodating enough to people’s families and children and the demands of taking care of aging or sick family members and what that entails.

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Whether it’s specific family leave benefits or flextime or things like that, I think there needs to be a consideration probably for that.

The difficulty of maintaining balance between work and family responsibilities was felt not only by participants as they attempted to find balance in managing their own work and family circumstances, but also by supervisors. These supervisors described significant challenges in the form of unmanageable workloads and sometimes opposition from their own supervisors as they try to create work environments that support the work-life balance of their staff. One supervisor, referring to the extra four paid vacation days granted to staff for summer 2008, and reflecting the concerns expressed by many supervisors about these extra days, stated, “And I kind of had to laugh when I got the email saying we were getting the four extra days off this summer because I was thinking, “Wow, how am I going to get the things done that I need to do and take those days myself? How am I going to get the goals of my organization done and give those days to my employees? How is that going to work?” Another supervisor, talking about struggling to accommodate the expectations and policies of the University with the work-life balance needs of his staff, explained:

It’s not my own work-life balance but it’s dealing with my staff and their personal issues. Whether it be a funeral that all of a sudden comes up, and how do you deal with that so that they feel comfortable walking away from their duties for those two days and that others pick up the pace. …or making sure that people take their vacations and you honor that time away. For me it’s leadership …and there is not a lot of real leadership about these issues…I don’t think my supervisor would support what I do and this is going to come out harsh, but I don’t care. I do it and just CYA, and we just go forward.

Other supervisors and administrators echoed similar concerns, emphasizing that the particular challenge for them is workload and staffing issues. As one interviewing explained “Flextime is great but I’m in an office that is short staffed as it is. I would like to give my staff flextime options but if I do and no one shows up until 10 a.m. and someone calls and no one answers then I am left holding the bag…”

I have several folks who are on flextime. We don’t technically have it, but if a person wants to take a vacation, if they let us know ahead of time, we just do it. So we don’t say, “You can’t do it,” or you can’t do it anytime there’s not this time or that time. Like for one of my folks the first week of school was the only time she could arrange a vacation with her family. There are things that we do in our office, if folks work particularly hard, I’ll close the office an hour early and leave. I don’t think my supervisors understand the value of doing things like that.

One finding from the survey that related to experiences of balance was puzzling to the Work-Life committee: the longer one is employed at the University, the more challenging balancing work and life demands becomes. What is surprising about this finding is that it would seem intuitive that the longer an employee is at the University, the better they would become at balancing home and work responsibilities.
However, the survey indicated the opposite. Insights into the reasons for this finding were interwoven throughout focus groups but captured most succinctly by one administrator:

I held this myth that as I got older that things would get easier and that’s been out the window for a long time and it’s just getting worse. I mean… I know there is no benefit in talking about the old days but it seems like the more you do the more you are asked to do, the more you seek to do, the more you want to do because you are loyal and a good employee and you care about the University. Carving out personal time and feeling good about it is becoming more and more difficult.

As this person suggests, the longer people are employed by the University, the stronger their loyalty and commitment to the institution become, and thus people are willing to take on more responsibility. Additionally, length of employment also expands one’s institutional knowledge and places an individual in the position of being more sought-after for committee assignments and the like, a fact that was underscored by several veteran employees.

Participants from all of the groups represented also described how, over time, their workload and the expectations of them changed. Many explained that the amount and nature of their work had changed fairly dramatically since they started working at the University. Participants emphasized that these changes made it more difficult to achieve a positive work-life balance. The changes described by participants that increased workload were the result of increased student enrollment in individual classes, increased paperwork, and diminishing staff, as well as an increasing need to document conversations and interactions with students. One participant explained the demands and challenges in a way that echoes what others described, “And we’re being asked to do more with the same staff that we had God knows how many years ago, with more students and more demands. And what gives there? We’re getting squeezed tighter and tighter budgetarily and personnel-wise.”

Despite a multitude of concerns expressed by participants about managing and maintaining work-life balance, employees in nearly every focus group emphasized their commitment to the University and their affection and high regard for colleagues. As one interviewee noted, “I love this University, I love so many people at this University, and I didn’t talk about that at all. That’s not what we’re here for. But I wouldn’t want anybody here to misinterpret my feelings, because I love working here.”

Many employees wanted readers of the report to understand that although they often felt overworked, unappreciated, and overwhelmed in their struggle to manage the demands of work responsibilities and life and family obligations, they also felt a high degree of commitment and loyalty to the University, their colleagues, and students. It was in part this loyalty and commitment to both colleagues and students that mediated participant’s ability to manage work demands. One participant summed up the feeling of many interviewees about their colleagues and the University when she explained, “Sometimes work feels like your life because the people that I work with every day feel much like family to me. But many of my favorite people in the world are people who work here. And so that helps. So when you are working a lot, you feel like you’re working for that community of people, for those students, it makes it worthwhile.”
Key Finding 2: Perceptions of University Culture and Relationship to Work-life Balance

- Existence of multiple cultures
- Inconsistency between the University’s rhetoric about work-life and action
- The University culture is one of doing more with less
- The University culture devalues and under-appreciates

Organizational culture encompasses the beliefs, values, and meanings used by members to understand how the organization operates and what is expected of them (Schultz, 1995). Organizational researchers who study work-family policies argue that the culture of an organization has a profound influence on both perceptions of balance and organizational members’ ability to manage the demands of work and home (Lewis, 1997). In light of this connection between culture and work-life balance, focus group participants were asked to describe the University’s culture as it relates to work-life balance and to explain how they believed this culture influenced employees’ ability to manage the competing demands of work and life. Participants described how multiple cultures exist on campus, and how some of the cultures interfere with their ability to manage work-life balance. They also were aware of a disconnect between the University’s stated values related to work-life balance and the policies, expectations, and workloads under which employees live day to day. These beliefs and perceptions, voiced by faculty, staff, and administrators in the focus groups, are further explained and detailed below.

Employees were quick to acknowledge the efforts made to assist them in achieving work-life balance. For example, a number of participants acknowledged that certain University policies—such as the paid week’s vacation between Christmas and New Years and the four additional summer vacation days provided for staff in summer 2008—are aspects of the culture that ease work-life demands and are “steps in the right direction” and evidence overall, that “the culture of the University [is] pretty pro-family.” However, the majority of staff, faculty, and administrators who participated in the work-life focus groups described a University culture and set of corresponding values that are not conducive to achieving a satisfying work-life balance. These sentiments are captured in the comments of one participant who explained: “I personally just don’t see this [the University] as a culture that encourages balance at all.”

A number of interviewees had difficulty identifying one University culture. Instead they described the existence of multiple cultures within the University, some encouraging of work-life balance and others not. As one participant explained, “When people ask me what it’s like to work at the University, I’m never sure what to say, because, well it’s not like there is one University, there are different cultures and it honestly just depends on where you work here what it is like.” A staff member confirmed this view by describing the different units in which he had worked and the ways these units differed. “Well, I’ve been in three different areas, almost four, and each one has had its own rules, feelings, flexibility. Part of it’s top-down. Part of it is the feeling they [supervisors] get from their higher-ups, and part of it’s just the culture that has developed in that area.” A faculty participant characterized the problems created when managing balance between these “multiple” cultures when describing the differences between attitudes in her department and the University as a whole:

For me there’s a difference between the University and the departments.
And the place where I see that difference most strongly for me is in
parenting a small child. And I would perceive my department as being very family-friendly. We’re fortunate to have department heads who are willing to listen when you say, “I need to have my classes scheduled at this time, not that time, because of children.” And I don’t feel like I’m viewed as an uncommitted employee because of that. I don’t have that same sense about the larger University. I feel like the larger University culture is such that if you are less than 100 percent committed with all of your time, 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, to University initiatives, you are a failed employee.

When describing the University’s culture as it related to work-life issues, many participants identified inconsistencies between the University’s rhetoric about work-family balance and the reality of practice. They explained that while public pronouncements by the administration regarding work-life balance were “wonderfully nice rhetoric,” the discourse itself had limited connection to reality, a point underscored by one faculty participant who, referring to the rhetoric, explained, “There’s no verb part of that. It’s not the doing, it’s the talking. Because as [as others have said], there’s so much going on, there’s so much expected of us. And if you look at how faculty are regarded and treated, there is tremendous inconsistency between the rhetoric and the behavior.”

Many participants believed that the University’s culture and its position on a range of issues that are integrally tied to work-life balance issues are leadership issues. Interwoven into their discourse about culture was their belief that key leadership issues are tied to the fact that aspects of the University’s culture are not supportive of work-life balance, that the rhetoric about this issue is not consistent with actions, and that many units do not address or carry out the administration’s positions on work-life balance. The affirmation of the need for work-life balance needs to come from the top. As one participant, echoing a sentiment expressed by many participants, stated: “I think Missouri State is a really great place to work. I think the majority of Missouri State functions as family that cares for each other. I think, unfortunately, we’ve gotten some dysfunctional parenting at the top.” A staff participant emphasized further the contradictions between the University’s discourse about the importance of family and the actual work and expectations by explaining:

I think the values about the importance of family and the balance between home life and work life are talked about but what actually happens is a different story. We’re just told to be here after hours, on the weekends, not asked if we can or how it affects us. And that’s a frustration because they don’t seem to really care how much time the job takes away from family. The job comes first. I don’t know, I mean if you asked anybody, they’d say of course family is important. It’s just more the attitude that comes across that’s different than what is actually said.

The contradictions between the rhetoric of the University on work-life issues and the reality of many policies and expectations caused confusion for many participants. In particular, they were confused about what was expected of them and where the values of the organization lie.
Other participants explained their struggle to understand the University’s culture, particularly its values and priorities. Several participants explained their own difficulty in pinning down the values of the University and defining those values. Others followed up on this point, indicating that the value of “getting things done quickly” was sacrificing quality for speed, and that what we should be putting our energy into—students and a good environment—was not happening. Focus group members expressed that the value of “urgency” about initiatives, which seemed to permeate the University’s culture and values, was leading the institution in a direction where the priority to value the human resources at the University—students and employees—is being lost. As one participant stated:

The values of the institution – I think right now you might look at the urgent, the now, the sacrifice quality to get it quickly. Although there are important things we’re working on, it is the urgent, and everything that is urgent is considered important. Instead of having student success as our top value and then following that with a good working environment for faculty and staff, those aren’t necessarily the espoused values that I hear on a day-to-day basis. I think to some extent the University’s culture is one where we are struggling with priorities and we are not on the right track.

Participants’ narratives paint a picture of the University’s culture as one where employees are asked to do more work with comparatively fewer resources. One interviewee described the situation as a “constant drive and push to do more, more, more, more, without any additional support, as far as financial resources or human resources.” Implementation of the Banner system was discussed in many focus groups as an example of this culture of doing more with less. Describing the intensity and impact of the workload generated by implementation of the Banner system, one staff member explained:

I don’t know who here has gone through the Banner training process but the implementation for our unit, which is for 18 months, two weeks out of the month, three days a week from 8:30-4:30…every week…But let me ask you: Did they hire anyone else to do your real job? I looked at that and I go, how on Earth can we even complete our regular duties and add all this, plus all these other committees and responsibilities? I’m looking at my unit going we are going to drown. It has got to happen but we are going to drown in the process.

The dual tensions of workload and resources were not only talked about by participants in regard to Banner, but in relation to other aspects of participants’ work lives. For example, a faculty member echoed the workload and resource concerns expressed by interviewees in nearly every focus group when he explained that the workload expectations and lack of tangible assistance and support, particularly in terms of committee work, is quite different from those of his colleagues at many other institutions:

When I first came on board full-time, I was groaning under the weight of committee work. Because between department stuff, college stuff, University-level stuff, I was on eight or nine committees. But looking back, it’s like, “Oh, I long for those days.” Because I’d do the committee work and we’d have
some charge and then a period of acute activity. Now it’s this constant stream of work. And … there’s not a lot of support. And I know this is just one piece, but there are some committee activities that are really labor intensive stuff… and I’m looking at other universities our size and talking to people there and in a lot of instances they pay somebody full-time to help with these things. And we don’t usually even get release time. It’s nuts. And I know some of this is trying to be efficient, trying to utilize resources and all that and I can appreciate that. But I’m like an Eveready battery that’s just draining and pretty soon there’s not going to be anything left…

In contrast to the concerns expressed about the overall culture and the specific cultures in different work units, many participants also described specific aspects of the culture that serve as buffers. There were two buffers that were mentioned most often by participants as assisting them in managing the multiple challenges faced when trying to balancing work and family demands—supervisors and colleagues. The role that supervisors play in the process of balancing is discussed elsewhere in this document. Perhaps the most important and valuable buffers described were positive colleague relationships. Several participants described the University culture as a “family” and emphasized the strong colleague relationships that exist at the University. For those who described the University in this way, it was these relationships with colleagues that acted as important buffers in managing work-life challenges and the perceived lack of administrative support. One interviewee explained her views in ways consistent with the perceptions of others when she noted:

And if it weren’t for the relationships with the colleagues, I don’t think any of us could survive it because it’s so unhealthy. [The administration] espouses to be collaborative and open to feedback and all that kind of stuff, but it’s just not… So what I see happening is that the majority of people that work here care about each other, and there’s really strong and supportive relationships. But they are stressed by the fact that their work lives and the work that they are doing here for the University are not being supported from higher ups.

Despite the buffers that workplace relationships offered, many participants still felt overwhelmed as they described what they felt were the work-life implications of this do-more-with-less culture. As one support staff member lamented, “When you get less, where is the more coming from? It’s coming from you and your time.” A faculty participant, commenting on the personal impact of the large number of University initiatives—all of which seem to be priorities—explained: “If there was a part carved out that was separate that you called life, the time for that’s just gone.” Many participants from all employee groups explained that the tensions and stress created by cultural demands could be to some extent lessened if they believed there was an acknowledgement of and appreciation for the extraordinary efforts being put forth by faculty and staff. This sentiment is best reflected in the words of one administrator who noted, “There’s always support for extra work: do it, do it, do it! But there is not an appreciation for people’s ability and willingness to get the work done regardless of the personal costs.”
Key Finding 3: Barriers to Managing Balance

- Rapid pace of change
- Supervisor ineffectiveness
- Workload
- Inadequate staffing
- Merit and evaluation processes
- Technology
- Communication breakdowns
- Lack of recognition

Participants in the focus groups were asked a series of questions to elicit the specific issues/processes that made it most challenging for them to achieve success in balancing work and family demands, as well as elements that mediated or lessened these challenges. We were interested in and asked as well about the specific impact of these challenges, not just on achieving or not achieving satisfactory work-life balance but also the perceived impact of these challenges on the work of the University. Many different barriers to achieving balance were identified; however, seven challenges in managing the tensions between work and family responsibilities emerged most often in discussions among all participant groups. These challenges to work-life balance, in their order of importance to participants, were: 1) the rapid pace of change, 2) supervisor ineffectiveness, 3) workloads and staffing, 4) merit and evaluation processes, 5) technology, 6) communication breakdowns, and 7) a perceived lack of recognition.

Rapid Pace of Change

Change was a common thread that was interwoven throughout participant discourse concerning work-life balance. While all participants recognized the value and necessity of change, particularly at this time in the University’s history, and while many participants welcomed change and praised the administration’s recognition of the need for change or moving forward with change, nearly everyone identified the pace of this change as being problematic at many different levels. Participants in every group identified the rapid pace of change, which they believe has characterized work at the University in recent years, as a major contributing factor to the challenges they and their colleagues faced in managing work-life balance. While this change was described in various ways by participants, the frenetic nature of the change, the stress it has created, and the fact that many interviewees identified the manner in which change has taken place as a “leadership issue” is captured in the words of the participant below:

It all comes down to the fact that we have chaotic leadership. And I have my own sort of way of visualizing leadership. I think of leadership as consisting of a balance between a brake and an accelerator, like in a car. And some leaders only know how to do one or the other. They only know how to propel things forward in change, or keep them the same. And if you had only a brake or an accelerator in your car, you would either not go anywhere at all, or you would go somewhere out of control, and you would hurt yourself. And we have, unfortunately, at the upper layers of leadership, we have accelerators and we don’t have brakes. And they’re all about change, but there’s no
control. And we are just zooming forward, out of control. Why did we turn there? Well, I don’t know. It looked like a good thing at the time. Basically, this whole thing’s running out of control, and that’s how it feels. And you can imagine kids (staff and faculty) riding in the back seat of the car, whose parents are only using the accelerator—you are covering your eyes, you are scared, you don’t know what to do, what’s expected or what will happen next. You can stop accelerating and slow down a little, but you’re never under control. It would be frightening and overwhelming, and I think that’s how it feels to all…to me—if you are a kid in this kind of family at least you can call child services—but what can we do?

Interwoven in participant discourse about change were discussions of the ways that the rapid change at the University in recent years has influenced employees’ work-life balance as well as the overall processes of the University. Rapid change affects work-life balance in many ways. For example, it causes work overload—too much work means employees cannot be balanced. It also affects how people work by not allowing time for employees and units to properly plan or reflect. Finally, it affects the way the University as a whole operates. Instead of a reasoned “ready, aim, fire” approach there is a “fire, aim, ready” approach that leads to backfires, miss-fires and a lot of inconsistency and unpredictability, creating stress for faculty, staff, and supervisors.

Interviewees frequently pointed to the rapid pace of change and accompanying deluge of new initiatives as being a major factor in their workload challenges and ultimately in their ability to achieve a level of balance in work-life experience. As one participant, echoing the sentiments of many interviewees, stated:

You talk about the myriad of initiatives that come down from higher up in the University—my God 12 or 13 major initiatives that’s ridiculous and all of the additional stuff we’re being asked to do, that if there was a part carved out that was separate that you called life, the time for that’s just gone.

The impact of change was felt not only in terms of direct implications for managing one’s work-life balance, as characterized by the participant above, but also on the way that staff, faculty, and administrators do their work. Fast-paced change does not leave time for reflection, and this lack of time for reflection impacts the kinds of decisions that are made. These concerns are characterized in the words of one administrator who described not only how she saw the University, a view similarly expressed by many others, but also how this rapid pace of change impacts the work of the organization:

…something that bothers me about the pace of things now is that I don’t feel like the best work gets done in that case. I feel that when there’s a sense of urgency about all kinds of things that have to be done today, today, today, I really believe that you do the best and most creative work when you focus on what’s truly important, and not just on what’s urgent…initiatives (and there are many) are not prioritized. And because of this I haven’t felt an ability to step back and work ahead in the way that I prefer, that I think is most effective, because it seems to just get more and more and more hectic, and it’s all you can do to keep up. And I’ve heard so many people recently saying,
“I’m just keeping my head above water.” And I say, “Well, that’s not the way we are going to do our best work for our students, in my opinion.”

Many participants acknowledged that the implications of rapid change not only affect employees at the individual level, but they permeate all organizational processes as well. Specifically, participants most often explained that the rapid changes affected the organization in terms of predictability and the consistency of decisions—or the lack thereof. As one interviewee emphasizing the implications of change explained, “…but it’s just so unpredictable, that the one thing you can predict is you won’t know what answer you’ll get next week, whether or not it’ll be the answer that you got last week.”

Another participant, an individual in a supervisory role, described this inconsistency and unpredictability in reference to the revisions to the merit and review process and particularly its implications for a supervisor’s credibility with staff:

Like the compensation stuff and the evaluation stuff. There were days when, literally, the rules would change by the hour. We would get an email telling us, “No, we’ve had this discussion and here’s what we’re going to do.” And later in the afternoon, they’d say, “Forget that latest memo. We’ve had some further discussions and talked with other folks, and now we need to do this.” And I thought, “What in the world are these people doing?” And then I look incompetent to the people who work for me because I am saying well this has changed or that has changed…

The implications of this lack of predictability and consistency were described in a myriad of ways. Some described the reasons for the lack of consistency and predictability as decisions made without enough information. As one interviewee stated, “I think sometimes decisions are made and you jump without there being enough information to have actually made the decision.” Another participant voiced two commonly held views expressed by many employees at all levels of the University: first, that the change is so rapid that it is impossible to keep pace and accommodate the change effectively, and second, because there are so many changes and there are limits to what can and cannot be done, it is hard to determine what the values and priorities are or should be:

They are creating the illusion of apparent movement…but one of the things that’s striking to me about the Keiser administration versus now – when he was in power, it definitely was top-down, by God it was going to be his way or the highway. But I knew what the values were and I knew what to push against and I knew where I wasn’t going to get anywhere. Now I don’t know what the values are. It’s harder for me to derive, because again, there’s rhetoric. And this is from someone who welcomes the change, welcomes most of it, welcomes the more open, transparent, collaborative efforts that seem to be happening. And at the same time, because things change so rapidly, because there was no plan for accommodating change, for dealing with change, managing it, I can’t adequately derive what the values are or where we are really going or frankly what I need to do and not do.
Participants also routinely expressed a concern that actions were being undertaken without a clear long-term plan, or, that if a plan existed, it was not being communicated to them. One interviewee, expressing a common sentiment, explained what they believed could be done to help faculty, staff, and administrators cope with and accommodate change more effectively:

For me definitely, it would be knowing that we have a long-term plan, that we can sit back, be thoughtful, plan for things, and not have this tyranny of the urgent. That, to me, would be the one thing. I think it would increase our effectiveness, I think it would increase our satisfaction, I think people would feel that their lives were more balanced.

Interviewees frequently talked about the impact this uncertainty has on them personally. One faculty member described the intense emotional state created by the current environment on campus:

I am untenured and I am overwhelmed…every time I turn around there is different information about what is expected for tenure, I do not know what I need to do so I do everything…I feel anxious and honestly frightened…I have started to take drugs because it’s the only way I am going to be able cope—I am just going to have to be on drugs to get through this…how sad is that?

The implications of the pace of change described in the narratives of participants were not merely inconveniences or minor annoyances, nor were they expressed only by those employees unsupportive of change. For many these multitude of changes were taking the University and employees off track, and many individuals in a majority of focus groups talked about their concern that much of the frenetic activity couched as positive change was in fact “taking the emphasis away from the human resources of students and employees where the real energy and focus should be…” The pace of change also created many work-life challenges in the form of significantly increased workloads, high levels of uncertainty and anxiety, and a lack of clarity and understanding about the values of where the University was headed.

Supervisor Inconsistency and Ineffectiveness

As noted earlier, many participants had difficulty identifying one University culture; rather they described multiple cultures based in part on differences among the different departments and units at the University. The one factor described in nearly every focus group as influencing the culture of units and departments was the supervisor. As one staff member explained, “Your supervisor or department head or whatever has the biggest impact on the culture and values of your unit and I think ultimately on if you are able to achieve work-life balance or not…” Many participants described their supervisors as providing significant work-life balance support to employees in their units by trying to keep workloads manageable, by insisting that employees take their vacation and comp time, and by creating firm boundaries for their employees between work and home time OR protecting their employees time away from the office by not allowing work problems to interfere with vacations. As one participant noted, explaining how their supervisor’s policies of “no calls about office problems during employees vacations” was “huge” in...
giving her “downtime” and providing them the ability to really “get away from work.” However, at issue for most participants when considering supervisor ineffectiveness was that, in many other instances, supervisors were unwilling or unable to interpret and enact University policies in ways that supported their employees in achieving work-life balance. For example, it was not uncommon to hear from participants stories like the one shared below, which describes an unwillingness by some supervisors to provide even a limited degree of flexibility to employees in managing their hours, despite a University policy that does allow for flextime.

There seems to be a very strong emphasis on official rules. I’ve worked for a couple of different departments, and one department I worked for was incredibly strict. They wanted you there by 8:00 and they wanted your lunch hour to be an hour. They didn’t care that you were there at 8:00 the night before fixing a problem that everyone at the University knew about, you were still – if lunch was an hour, to take an hour. Even if your total day was 8 hours or more, you couldn’t take a 90-minute lunch and be here until 5:30. And it didn’t matter that the University seems to have some flexibility about these things. They were really strict, and it was like, “Those are the guidelines, that’s what we’re doing.” The rigidity seemed to me and other people to be a detriment towards the ability to balance work and home life.

Many participants, particularly those in staff support and staff clerical positions, described supervisor behaviors like those captured above as “demoralizing” and explained that in the face of such policies they felt as though they were not “trusted.” Many participants explained that supervisor inflexibility, particularly when they recognized that University policies allowed for some limited flextime options, caused them frustration and a level of anger at not being afforded the same flextime benefits that others on campus enjoyed. And, oftentimes this scheduling inflexibility prevented them not only from being able to manage their home-work challenges but also from taking advantage of many training and wellness opportunities that employees in these situations felt would actually make them better employees.

The specific policies of supervisors were not the only aspect of the supervisor’s influence that impacted the ability of employees to manage work and life demands in ways that optimized work-life balance. Many participants also discussed how a supervisor’s attitude made a difference in their unit’s work-life culture overall and in their sense of being able to have a positive work-life balance. This contrast between supervisors’ approaches to their own work-life balance and the impact of supervisor’s attitude on their employees’ view of work-life balance is captured in the two very different descriptions of supervisor approaches shared by two interviewees. One participant described the positive impact a supervisor could have:

My particular supervisor – work is work, but she’s all about having fun and doing stuff. And she has a very active life outside of work, and she expects others to have the same. So there’s an appreciation for the fact that we all have other things that we care about besides work. That’s very nice and it gives us permission to be balanced.
Another explains the exact opposite, as well as the negative implications for employee work-life balance:

There are work-to-live and live-to-work people. You need both in an effective organization, and people that their life is very much tied into their work, their definition of balance is going to be very much different than somebody who is a work-to-live person. So we have to acknowledge that both types exist and both types are valid, and how they define balance is going to be way different. But just because I may be a work-to-live person doesn’t mean everybody should be…and I think supervisors who are live-to-work people need to recognize that…I worked under one of those live-to-work types and I never felt it was OK to have balance…there was always this guilt at not working as much or all the time.

Overall, at least from the perspective of participants in these focus groups, the impact of one’s supervisor on an employee’s ability to achieve work-life balance and feel good about doing this cannot be underestimated. The impact of supervisor effectiveness is complex, and the ability of employees to address supervisor issues in regards to work-life balance issues is limited and is captured well in the conclusions of one participant:

…the skill level of your supervisor has such significance, whether it’s in academia or in business. People leave their jobs because of their supervisors—and I certainly know people who have left here—really good people, so it’s the ability of the supervisor to manage, to empower the people that work under them, and trust that [they’ve] hired well. But then it’s also a communication level that you have, because I hear from the clerical side and many others, sometimes there’s a fear of their supervisors because they will not communicate and it makes it pretty difficult to talk about concerns or problems that you have with what they are doing or not doing.

It should also be noted—as explained in the section of this report dealing with balance—that in many instances supervisors felt constrained by University policies that they felt were too inflexible and did not provide them with the leeway necessary to be most accommodating to the work-life balance needs of their employees.

Workload

Overwhelming workloads were discussed in a variety of ways, but participants generally described workloads well beyond an individual’s ability to manage the work in effective and productive ways. One particular workload challenge discussed across all participant groups was the tension between time off and workload demands. One administrator/staff member characterizes this tension when she explains her reaction to finding out about the four additional paid days this summer:
It’s great to get those days, but unless you change how you look at what you have to accomplish and what you’re going to be doing those days you’re not off, you’re still going to be working 12-hour days or 15-hours days or whatever to make up for that, does that really accomplish what we want it to?

Workload was perceived by participants to be influenced by a variety of factors. Factors discussed by participants included increases in the amount of work required, staff levels that have not kept pace with the workload demands of units and are not in many cases reflective of other similar peer institutions, and the imbalance in the workloads of different units and for different people. This latter issue of uneven workload expectations was captured in the words of one participant:

For me, personally, it is – I think somebody mentioned it earlier – I’ve been doing a lot of other people’s work for them, which obviously increases my workload. But I wonder, “How do they get away with that?” I want to get in that line. And I’ve worked in private business while I was working my way through college. And it wasn’t tolerated, at least the places where I worked. If you weren’t pulling your weight, you’re out of there. Here, if you’re not pulling your weight, “Sit over there, we’ll take care of it.” And that’s pretty much it. That’s probably what impacts me, because workload impacts my work-life balance more than anything. It’s not the complexity. I love the people I work with, I love working with a variety of people on campus. Amazing people here, it’s a great place to work. There’s just a lot of work. And I look around, not everybody’s got a ton of work. Why don’t we hold people accountable for pulling their own weight?

Similar to the comment above, others described a general “lack of accountability” for “shouldering one’s share of the responsibilities,” a fact that participants described as significantly increasing the workload of others. As one administrator/staff member noted:

Yes, I think the lack of accountability probably is what’s driving that, is that people haven’t been held accountable for the work that they’re doing or not doing. And it’s a lot easier for somebody to say, “OK, I’ll do it, I’ll do it” so that it gets done.

Focus group members also frequently referred to the deluge of new initiatives and the rapid pace of work as being a major factor in their workload challenges. The pace created to sustain this workload was also discussed:

The thing that I worry about is that it’s kind of, everything gets ramped up. So you’re ramping up those and you’re increasing all those things, but this place almost at times just gets frantic. We’ve got to do this, got to do this, got to do this, and we’re shooting off in 15,000 directions—there is no focus and the last thing we have time for is the most important and that’s students.
Many in the focus groups felt the increased workload had a cumulative effect. As one participant voiced, “It’s like there’s no cost to anything, like every effort, every endeavor that comes down the pike, ‘Oh, it’s just one more thing, so it’s not a big deal.’ But enough grains of sand and pretty soon it’s too much.” This idea of employees being buried, little by little, was a common theme, and as the participant below explained, employees are acutely that this is not the way things have always been.

All those things, only there are about 1000 of them, and I think we’re losing our focus. And I think we’re trying to do just a lot of things that take an awful lot of time and energy with very little benefit. So I think it’s one thing to say we’re going to do all these things, and we’ll give you all these resources and we’ll do all these wellness programs. By the same token, if you look at what faculty and staff are expected to do now compared with 40 years ago… it just keeps growing. And this is what I am talking about, this incremental creep.

“Well, could you do this?” And it’s not a big deal. But when you look at that over a 10- or 20-year span it is a big deal you get worn out and you withdraw. So there’s that issue. So that concerns me in terms of the workload, and it concerns me in terms of what’s coming. You start to wear people out.

The impact of this increasing workload and expanding demands on faculty, staff, and administrator’s time was a major issue for many, affecting individual’s resilience and focus. One participant, explaining the impact of workload and echoing a commonly expressed experience of many participants, stated “I’ll wake up in the middle of the night thinking about what I should’ve done or how I need to do things.” Participants also repeatedly expressed how this workload and seemingly unsustainable pace affected the quality of the work they did.

And you may want to talk about this later, but something that bothers me about the pace of things now is that I don’t feel like the best work gets done in that case. I feel that when there’s a sense of urgency about all kinds of things that have to be done today, today, today, I really believe that you do the best and most creative work when you focus on what’s truly important, and not just on what’s urgent. And I haven’t felt an ability to step back and work ahead in the way that I prefer, that I think is most effective, because it seems to just get more and more and more hectic, and it’s all you can do to keep up. And I’ve heard so many people recently saying, “I’m just keeping my head above water.” And I say, “Well, that’s not the way we are going to do our best work for our students, in my opinion.”
Inadequate Staffing

In many ways, workload and staffing are different sides of the same coin. The workload was perceived by many participants to be extensive. Participants explained many times and in different ways that they perceived that many units are not staffed in ways comparable to peer institutions, and yet those same units have the same workloads and are evaluated in ways similar to those peer institutions. An explanation by one participant characterizes the concerns expressed by many.

It goes back to the fact that we’re moving at about 180 miles an hour, we’re understaffed. If you compare us – I heard you mention the benchmark peers – compare us and our staffing level to our benchmark peers. We get a hell of a bang for our buck. But we work people like dogs and we ride them hard… and it just wears people out.

Many participants throughout focus groups discussed how workloads within units often increased yet staffing did not. A number of examples were given, including increasing numbers of students added to classes without corresponding assistance with grading and the like, and new initiatives undertaken (like Banner) without additional staff. Workload issues were exacerbated by inadequate staffing within units and inequities in staffing across units, as characterized by one interviewee who explained:

It’d be hard for me to say, because for the first 19 years here, or however long, I wasn’t at this level so I wasn’t exposed to some of the eye-opening things that I’ve seen over the last five or six years. It was a real surprise for me when H.R. started sharing some of the exit interview situation, and why we were losing people out of certain units is because they were bored to death. It comes back to leadership. So why do we have a leader somewhere in the unit of the university that’s not saying, “I’ve got a position I don’t need”? Is it a perks issue and they don’t want to give it up or convert it into a position that they do need? I don’t know that I have an answer. I don’t know whether it’s any worse today. Maybe this has been going on for 25-30 years, I’ve just not been exposed to it.

An additional commonly cited concern was the time required to replace lost employees. Participants talked about the dramatic impact that unfilled positions had on a department or unit, as the individual below states:

And then coming back to losing a lot of people – we can hire a basketball coach in 18 days, but how long does it take to hire a staff member if someone leaves? There’s so many hoops that everybody has to jump through, especially if you’re a small department. And you have a vital member and your secretary leaves or your director leaves, there’s such a long gap in that search process that it’s really hard on people in that area.
Interviewees also expressed concerns that requests for additional necessary full-time staff might be denied and instead part-time or student workers would be used. One participant, agreeing with concerns expressed by others, described the impact this had on their unit:

That’s generally been my experience, too. I’ve worked in two different areas on campus and I think a lot of it has to do with management. Because the experience that I can relate to is a lack of human resources, particularly having to rely on work-study student workers to fill slots. It’s nice to have that option to hire work-study student workers, but only being able to hire work-study student workers to cover a position is a nightmare because you get what you get. And you really don’t have any option with regards to letting them go. If they show up 50 percent of the time, you have someone there some time as opposed to never having someone there.

Increased workloads without the requisite staff to assist with increases was a concern expressed by participants in all focus groups. The impact of the workload/staffing issue directly influenced employees’ ability to manage work-life balance.

**Merit and Evaluation Processes**

Focus group participants acknowledged the importance and necessity of evaluating employees at all levels of the institution. However, nearly all interviewees described the current merit and evaluation system as flawed and believed that in its present form it discourages positive work-life balance and was detrimental to the cooperative and collaborative environment that previously existed within many departments and between departments and their respective colleges. Participants believe that the merit system (as it is presently configured), as well as administrative directives and explanations of the merit guidelines and processes, is unclear and does not present definitive guidelines about the work required for merit rating. Interviewees described the ratings and work required to achieve these ratings as “confusing” “changing from day to day” and “moving targets,” and in many focus groups participants described instances where ratings given at one level were changed, without explanation, at another level (e.g., from unit to supervisor or from department to dean).

Interviewees further described circumstances where staff within a unit were told that only a certain percentage of fives (5s) and fours (4s) could be given and that most would receive a merit rating of three (3) regardless of the quality and level of their work. These perceptions about and understandings of the merit process result in employees feeling the need continually do more without knowing “how much is enough.” Many believe that no matter how much work they do or how well they do that work that most will be designated as average.

The merit system also causes employees to feel that they are in competition with their colleagues for monetary incentives, a circumstance that is exacerbated in many cases by lower-than-average salaries. This competition makes them less likely to engage in collegial behavior and increases the strain they feel...
at work. In order to compete, employees have to spend time working when they are at home to the
detriment of their home life and work-life balance.

In every focus group interview participants from clerical staff through administrators commented upon the merit process. The current merit system was seen by the vast majority of faculty and staff as a major contributing factor to their inability to manage a balance between their work and home lives, as the participant below noted.

One thing that I see that I really don’t like is that we took a system where the department and college to some extent, that was essentially cooperative and collaborative to a system that is competitive, I do my best work under those [collaborative] circumstances. I really benefit from working together with other people and bouncing ideas off them. That makes my life good. We have laid on top of that a system that is now competitive. So we injected competition where it wasn’t before, and I think to the detriment of my work, and to some extent my relationship with colleagues, and my family relationships. Because that’s the place where it’s more likely for work to come home with me, is that when we were working under a much more competitive model.

When describing the merit system and the problems with that system, several participants described—as the faculty member below does—the problem with coupling merit with salary increases and the impact of this on achieving balance.

And it’s exactly what you’re saying, and you do pretty well, and yet there’s that pile the next day. And yes, of course, you could tell yourself to stop over-committing yourself, you could tell yourself, “OK, I’m just going to do the minimum.” But according to the pay for performance, that’s resigning yourself to a 0 to 1 percent pay raise—no one can afford to do that. But balance in my life versus pay raise --I’m not there yet.

Another interview echoes the words of the participant above explaining:

I felt free-er to say, “I’m going to choose to take this two hours in the middle of the day to do family stuff, and then I’m going to choose to make that up in two hours on the weekend,” and I felt much more flexible. I don’t feel freedom to make those choices, and in fact, I feel like I have to put in much more time when I’m at home on work, to the detriment of my family. And that I attribute to the competitive model, because I’ll be behind in the competition, and I don’t like that.

One administrator, talking about the challenges with the current merit system, expressed a common belief that the current merit system risked de-motivating employees who already feel like their work and efforts are not recognized.
And we need to know whether we’re doing a good job with that, because once that’s done… I felt like that, too, there’s a lot of pressure not to give really good evaluations. I don’t think we should inflate evaluations, but I also think when you have really good people who feel underappreciated, and then they’re accustomed to a certain type of evaluation and then all of a sudden they’re getting something else, we just need to understand that that’s going to have an impact on how people feel.

Another explained that the need to balance evaluations and force them to fit a given pattern (i.e., a certain number of 5, 4, and 3 rankings) did not fit her unit, explaining:

And I don’t supervise a lot of people, and I think there was a lot of pressure to have balance in your evaluations within your department. Well, I won’t say that I have the best people on campus, but the bell curve doesn’t always apply. And in fact, there are probably some departments, from what we’ve been talking about, where it should be skewed to the lower evaluations. But that’s not… It’s like we’re all going to fit in the same size box.

The implications of this merit system, perceived by most to be skewed heavily toward competition rather than collaboration, affect not only individual faculty and staff. Rather, as the administrator below emphasizes, it is also structured in a way that discourages interdisciplinary connections and collaborations between colleges:

… for faculty and staff, the merit system is not set up to collaborate it’s structured for competition. And then you have competition between the colleges for resources, too, because they’re all individual cost centers. And so they all make their cases to the Provost for additional money when it is available. And rather than saying, “What can colleges do together to maybe share a position or to share a unit?” or something like that, or to cost share – that’s just not there yet. It’s major growing pains with the cost center model, and it’s rewarding and valuing competition.

The current merit process was viewed by interviewees not just as impacting collegiality and collaborative efforts but also limiting employees’ willingness to engage in a wide range of service activities that are essential to the University and the community. As one participant noted in discussing the merit system’s implications for a particular service activity they coordinate, “And when we went to this merit system, there were people who always volunteered who were excellent, who said, “I can’t do this. I’ve got to take care of research, or I don’t get enough points for it—for service—I need to put my effort somewhere else.” This individual went on to explain his reaction to losing this service support: “They had to look out for themselves, and the people who… I didn’t blame them. It saddened me, but I didn’t blame them.”

The uncertainty in the current merit systems also creates challenges for faculty and staff as they try to create balance in their lives:
I would say somewhere between 1 and 2 in terms of balance. And I would say that’s largely because there are not clear standards or any ratings. You don’t want to shoot for 3’s anymore because there’s no guaranteed minimum pay raise. So you try to shoot for 4, and then even if you do everything for a 4 in whatever areas, you still don’t know if you’re going to get it. In my college, half the ratings got changed by the President when they got together, and all but two of them got changed downward. So all these people had done what they thought they needed to do for whatever they had shot for, and then they were downgraded because someone else in some other department did more. So it’s like, you could never get to (inaudible) because you don’t know what enough is, for one thing. You don’t know what enough is, so how can I know when I’ve done enough?

As this person suggests, the current merit system is perceived to be an ever-changing system set up in a way that means one never knows when they have “done enough.” Many participants talked about chasing points in ways that seemed to them both counterproductive and counterintuitive. However, they felt pushed to do so because it was the only way or primary way they were evaluated, and because it was the major—if not the only—way to increase salaries.

While participants leveled a wide range of criticisms at the current merit system, these criticisms were often prefaced with comments that acknowledge the need to evaluate performance. As one participant explained: “I know that we need an evaluation system and I support merit evaluations. My problem is with this system. For me the system is flawed and the communication about how the system is to work is flawed.”

Technology

For participants, technology was a double-edged sword—on the one hand providing opportunities for flexibility while on the other intruding on already limited home time.

This extreme was illustrated by a participant throwing a Blackberry on the table and saying “That’s the problem with my work-life balance.” Another focus group member described how the constant connection created by technology allowed for little differentiation between work life and home life:

I…the thing I struggle with is because everything is in the electronic age now and because we can have things so easily digitized it is very easy to take it home with you and sit at your computer because you are accessing it from home. So then that time is spent working but then you are also thinking about all the things that you should be doing at home and with all the people who are home and doing those things with them.

Additionally, while technology provides more opportunities to telecommute, employees indicate that most work units do not utilize opportunities to telecommute, and employees who do work from home
expressed that they often felt that they were “suspect” and that their supervisors and fellow employees questioned whether they were actually working. Many employees expressed a desire for expanded telecommuting opportunities.

Communication

Communication was acknowledged as a major issue for the most focus group participants. Many perceived that communication at the University, coming from the top down, was inconsistent or difficult to interpret. As one participant stated, “Communication is there, but it’s not always as clear as I might like it to be.”

Additionally, a commonly expressed view was the communication back up the chain of command was not always listened to or understood, creating additional work and concerns for faculty and staff.

I came as a professor, and as a faculty member the balance is always interesting, because I always took homework home and graded it as I watched TV. It always blurred. This whole thing has always been a blur for me, and sometimes it’s easier than other times. But being in this position now is just very, very different. But I think right now this top-down approach that we’re getting and the not listening sort of thing has generated an enormous amount of work at our level, and then at the department head level, rather than allowing for the listening and that creativity that occurs at that level.

An administrator expressed a common frustration with the channels of communication at the University: that it is not always clear and leads to mis-communication and misunderstandings.

And it’s also clear communication. We are, all of us, kind of in a middle sort of a position. We answer up, we answer down sort of thing. And having those lines of communication always open and freely flowing and always clearly understood is difficult. It’s always tough for me to make sure that my department heads clearly understand what I’m saying, and then hopefully that the faculty get the message, phone tree kind of thing. But you’re also doing a phone tree up the line, too. Having people above you clearly communicate expectations as well, and sometimes the phone tree falls apart, and then that becomes difficult.

The difficulties posed by this lack of communication, and the misunderstandings that result, impacted many in the focus groups. As one interviewee stated:

And I think that leads to a lot of misunderstanding about how what I’m doing has to do with what we’re trying to accomplish, and I think it causes tension. And it’s difficult when you have that tension at work not to take it home... you have to shut it off. Not everyone that I’ve worked with, or even myself,
are able to shut it off and go home. I think some people take their worry about their job home with them.

Participants also strongly voiced the view that the leadership of the University often does not respect the knowledge and experience of employees. One interviewee described the administration’s attitude as “Let’s do it my way. Yes, you’ve done it successfully here for many years but I’ve got another idea.” Others noted that problems are often created because decision-makers do not request input or feedback from employees when it comes to making decisions that impact them. One example of this came from the decision to offer employees an extra four vacation days over the summer:

Again, that’s a prime example of what I mean is did anyone ask—what would be the impact on your major priorities, what would be the impact on your scheduling if everyone has four additional days…residence life and services which has I don’t know how many custodial staff and they have been told you can’t take vacation here and here because we have got to clean up the mess from the spring …nobody asked and oh everybody is having to figure that out and it will impact negatively on many operations and there is no consultation with the people—I mean I don’t need to be consulted on everything but there are some critical areas that I need to be asked…

This perceived failure to request input and ask questions of those who will be impacted by policy decisions was not limited to the administration. Participants also discussed how their own supervisors often made decisions without utilizing the expertise and wisdom found in their own units.

I think they need to listen and learn. I don’t mean just President or a Provost. Even my boss – I’ve been here for nine years – he doesn’t know what I do. And maybe because he doesn’t feel he has time to spend because of the pressures he perceives he’s under. But I think if there was a better understanding of what goes on down here in the University, then they’d better understand the capabilities that all these people have and what they bring to the table, and I think things would run smoother. I think sometimes decisions are made and you jump without there being enough information to jump. We may be inferring that there are people at the top that aren’t letting us manage our areas that create the correct work-life balance, but I think what [name deleted] said earlier is important – it also applies to the Board. I honestly think the Board interferes, and I know that certainly in Student Affairs when it comes to enrollment we’ve expended – that’s not my area – but we’ve spent some money doing things that the Board wanted to do which enrollment tried before that was not productive. But because the Board wanted it done, we did it. And I think that’s the old, “Will you listen to us? We’ve done it, it doesn’t help.”

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Lack of Recognition

Focus group participants expressed a real need for recognition of the work, expertise, and value they and their colleagues offer to the University. Others discussed how the extraordinary efforts of employees at all levels go unrecognized. As one interviewee stated, “There’s a lot of smart people ... and a lot of times they’re just brushed aside. And I think that hurts a lot of people.” Others also described how the lack of acknowledgement and trust impacted morale:

I think the lack of trust of those who work at the University and the lack of value for their opinions. And when that occurs, then I think that sort of skews the scale and puts the pressure on at work, and I think folks are likely to carry that home with them.

Understanding employees’ need for respect and acknowledgement, others discussed how they tried to find ways to creatively acknowledge and reward those in their units. This recognition, and employee support, were seen by many as vital to the success of the entire system. As one interviewee explained: “Human resources are the most important thing that we have on this campus. That’s what we spend the most money on. And if we don’t take care of one another and value one another, the whole thing kind of falls apart.” The end result of the failure to respect employees was summed up in the following way:

And building on that, I think if you don’t do what (inaudible), you run the risk of people leaving. And then you lose a lot of historical understanding of what’s important. And we see that. We see a lot of people saying, “I’m not going (inaudible). I’ve always been able to go someplace else and get paid more.” And perhaps understood better, treated better, more likely to balance my work and my life, get appreciated better. And then that makes us poorer for it because we lose that.

Key Finding 4: Monetary Benefits Helpful in Achieving Balance

- Access to benefits
- Expanded fee waivers
- Employee Assistance Program
- Adequate health care
- Expanded family leave and disability benefits
- Expanded and formalized flextime
- Adequate salaries
- Affordable accessible day care
- Partner benefits

A list of benefits and rankings summarized from survey results was given to focus group participants (see Appendix F). Individuals were then asked to identify and discuss specific benefits that were not included on the list that they felt were important in managing work-life balance. Interviewees were also asked to
review the listed benefits generated from survey data and describe those that they felt were particularly important for them in managing the demands of work and life and in what ways these benefits assisted in easing work-life challenges. The results of this question revealed a number of benefits that employees believed would be helpful in achieving a more positive work-life balance. Although the benefits discussed were surprisingly consistent across employee groups, it is instructive to note that participants acknowledged that certain benefits were more or less important to them depending upon their immediate circumstances or life-stage. For this reason, many participants argued for the University to establish a cafeteria system of benefits wherein an employee would be given a certain amount of money from which they could select from a cafeteria of benefits depending upon their particular need. This section provides a brief explanation of the benefits, listed in order of importance, that employees identified as ones that were or would be most helpful to them in managing work and family obligations effectively.

Before proceeding further it is important to emphasize that many employees recognized and discussed the value of certain existing benefits in contributing positively to their work-life balance. These benefits, mentioned often by focus group participants, include the paid week’s vacation between Christmas and New Years and the University’s efforts in promoting wellness programs and activities. The sentiment echoed by one staff member was consistent with comments across focus groups when he noted that “The week off at Christmas, when we get paid for it, is a big deal. It’s a really big deal.” Several interviewees explained that they as well as others they knew had actually come to the University, many taking a cut in pay to do so, specifically because of the paid vacation between Christmas and New Years. Many other interviewees described the value of the wellness programs and activities as a benefit that assisted them not only in becoming healthier but also in reducing the stress caused by work-life balance tensions.

Access to Benefits

While several existing benefits like the Christmas holiday and wellness program were described positively by nearly all participants, there was a corresponding negative dimension to these benefits as well. Although benefits like these may exist and be perceived as helpful in achieving more positive work-life balance, they cease to be beneficial and actually become liabilities when people are not able to take advantage of them. This liability is captured well by one participant who reflected the feelings of many when they explained:

A benefit is not a benefit unless you can actually take advantage of it…sometimes I feel like I’m looking in a department store window at Christmas and there are all those benefits but I can’t have them…so what’s the point…its worse than no benefit at all…

Many employees voiced their frustration at having so much work to do that they often ate lunch at their desks, lost accrued vacation days, and were unable to take advantage of many University events and activities. Other employees, particularly those in staff clerical roles, were unable to take advantage of University-sponsored activities like wellness programs because of inflexible work schedules mandated by supervisors. As one staff member emphasized, “It may exist in the policy, but if your boss says, We’re not going to do it, it doesn’t matter.” Considerable frustration was also expressed by supervisors and

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administrators who explained that it was not only difficult for them to take advantage of University-sponsored activities and days off, but also that it is difficult for them to assure that the employees they supervise are able to do so. Time and again in focus groups discussions, supervisors discussed the challenges of making sure their units accomplished required tasks while the same time making sure their staff took accrued vacations and comp time. This frustration is summed up in the words of one participant who focused on the additional four days of vacation granted to staff in summer 2008, “We asked to do 10-hour work days, four days a week, so we’d get a three-day weekend. That I might have accomplished for me and my staff. But now I’m like, we can’t even take the vacation days we have, how are we going to get four more in?”

Credit-course fee waiver benefits were yet another area where the decisions of an employee’s supervisor played a key role in their ability to utilize the benefit. One interviewee, echoing the words of many, explained that while they were able to complete their degree during lunch hours and through flextime availability in their unit, others they knew were not so fortunate:

I’m very fortunate I haven’t experienced that [referring to the refusal of a supervisor to allow flexible work options], but I do know people who have. I’m very fortunate I was able to take classes on my lunch hour and finish my degree. I know people who have 59 minutes for lunch. You better not be gone 60; you better be gone 59 and you better be back.

As the words of employees above suggest, access to benefits—not just the existence of benefits—is a critical element in managing work and life demands effectively. And, for many employees, the existence of a benefit without access to the benefit creates more tension and frustration than if the benefit did not exist at all.

**Expansion of Course Fee Waivers**

Expanding the fee-waiver system was one of the benefits cited most often by employees as being particularly helpful in managing work-life balance. Participants cited a number of ways the fee-waiver system could be expanded. Suggestions included simply expanding the number of tuition credits from 12 hours to 18 or 20 hours per year. As many explained, the current policy of allowing employees 12 free credit hours per year did not pay for even one child attending the University full time. One employee summed up their concerns about the sentiments many expressed when they stated:

I have two in college here now, and 12 hours a year… well, I’m thankful I’ve got it to offer to them, but it really isn’t a whole lot. It has put a burden on us financially and that is just one more straw added to the tensions I feel in balancing work-life stuff. I know some other colleges and universities in the area offer full tuition waivers for children and I’m not sure why MSU can’t do that too.
Others indicated they had not utilized the fee-waiver system until their children were ready to attend college and expressed frustration that the 12 hours per year of free tuition did not cover tuition costs but also their frustration that a portion of unused hours from previous years could not be banked.

You made me think of a point that I have had in the past…a banking system for those credit hours. So if you’ve served the University for 35 years and you suddenly have a need for those credit hours and you only get 12 a year, that would be a way to do it [banking hours] so that you had more than 12 a year if you served the University for a certain number of years.

Other participants indicated their desire to apply tuition credits to campus day care and Greenwood, explaining how having their children close by and being able to check on them or have lunch together was a significant benefit, one they would happily exchange for higher salaries or other tangible benefits. The connection between expanded tuition waivers and balancing work-life demands may not be readily apparent; however, many participants coupled their talk about expanding the fee-waiver system with explanations of how it would allow them to balance the demands of work and family more easily. The most compelling impact was financial. To have expanded tuition credits or to be able to bank a portion of credits each year lessened the financial burden of college and for some meant they did not have to take extra jobs or send their children to college elsewhere (which for some was a loyalty issue). For others, being able to use tuition waivers for Greenwood or campus daycare relieved significant financial burdens as well as the challenges of picking up children after school, searching for affordable and accessible daycare, and the like. Finally, for those (many of whom are staff) who want to extend their education, being allowed to apply Missouri State tuition credits to other state universities in Missouri lessened the financial burden and allowed access to advanced degrees and online courses not available at Missouri State. Still others believe as one employee stated, “It might attract more employees and it would mean that some people stay instead of taking jobs at Drury or other places just to get a better tuition deal…”

**Employee Assistance Program**

Data from focus groups suggest that employees at all levels of the organization experience work-related stressors and personal problems that create significant challenges for them in managing positive work-life balance. At present, there is no program at the University that addresses these concerns. The following quote illustrates the need for an employee assistance program of some kind and the potential impact such a program would have:

We do not have a program that provides psychological services, counseling. I’m not well versed on what that kind of program looks like. But the point is, we serve students in this way, but we’re not serving employees. We’ve got people who need counseling for emotional problems, who have problems at work and that’s not appreciated by the University. We would get more from people and get their best work…if we would help them resolve those personal and professional issues. And other than within your own department, if
you’ve got a sensitive, caring supervisor, that’s not happening. I think we need to look at resources for the real-life issues.

The development of an Employee Assistance Program that would provide confidential and comprehensive support to employees and their families was described by many participants as “critical” for employees in achieving positive work-life balance. In one focus group, an employee from the health center pointed out (a fact that was later confirmed) that following statins, psychotropic drugs are the most prescribed for University employees. In nearly every focus group participants described situations in their own units or in units they were familiar with in which employees needed formal support or the type of counseling or psychological assistance that was not available at the University. One employee in Student Services captured the concerns and sentiments of many when they asked “Where do I go for support when I have just talked a student down from a suicide attempt?” Another participant pointed out that many units with an employee who is in a violent marriage or one who has a drinking problem deal with these issues informally but went on to say “These problems create stressors for the person dealing with the problem and for others in the unit—this is a work-life balance concern—at least from my perspective—and we need to find ways to deal with this in a more formal and confidential way...”

**Adequate Health Care Benefits**

Participants emphasized that having affordable sufficient health care benefits was critical to their well-being and ultimately to positive work-life balance. They appreciated the health benefits provided by the University and recognized these benefits as significant. However, interviewees also expressed concerns about several aspects of their health care benefits. Many, particularly those employees in lower salary brackets, indicated that deductibles were too high and for many others these high deductibles precluded them from accessing health care resources. The cost of insuring families, particularly children, was a concern for many, and several interviewees revealed that they or others they knew at the University were without health care for their families for this reason. One interviewee explained that the administration was not perhaps aware of the problem because they did not interact with or receive input from the very employees who could least afford the currently deductible:

I think that if they’ll [administration] actually read the comments and think about the people that are associated with those comments, then that will really educate them on what people are really thinking. Because I think most of the time they’re so busy, they’re in meetings all the time. And most of the people that they’re in meetings with are not the people you’re talking about. They’re not the people that don’t take their kids to the doctor because they can’t even afford an $800 deductible.

The high cost of coverage for employees’ families and children was also a concern. As one staff member explained, “I mean, when my wife had our child last year, we calculated out, we spent $10,000 on medical bills, between paying for the right to have the insurance, and then $5000 out of pocket, on top for expenses not covered by the insurance.” Focus group participants noted frequently that many of their coworkers did “not even have family insurance...” for this reason. Others discussed how they or their co-

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worker’s families suffered as a result of not being able to afford family health coverage. “They can take themselves but they can’t take their child because the amount of the family [insurance coverage] is too expensive. Things like that, and that stresses people.”

Several supervisors and administrators explained that the high cost of medical insurance at the University and the correspondingly high deductibles often made hiring difficult, particularly for lower paid staff positions:

I was hiring for an administrative secretary last year, and the starting salary was about $18,000—it’s a little higher now. Now I interviewed a great person, but she said, “How much is it going to cost to have my child on health insurance? I’m a single mom. How much does it cost to have insurance for her?” I said, $300 a month. That ends up being close to a fifth of her annual salary that she would have to put right away just to have insurance for her child. You get the insurance, so great, you’ve got this insurance, now you’re figuring out how to make the payment. You still don’t see anything covered until after $800 more is paid out. I lost this hire to Drury because their health insurance benefits were better…

One participant put an exclamation point on the issue of health benefits and the importance of these benefits in managing work-life balance when he said, “We’re talking here about work-life balance and I would just like somebody higher up to know that the last thing I need to have to worry about as I try to balance the work I have to do with my family responsibilities is that I or somebody in my family gets sick and I have to worry about what my insurance is going to pay and how I am going to pay the rest…”

Short Term Family Leave and Disability Benefits

The difficulties caused when employees are called upon to care for sick family members, or the struggles they face when they themselves are unable to work due to a short term disability, or the tensions between the joy of welcoming a new child into a family coupled with the tension of not having enough sick leave to take maternity leave were discussed as significant hurdles to overcome in managing work-life balance. Although employees are able to use sick days to care for a child, they face struggles caring for other family members, and as one participant explained “Because family isn’t just a child you have or a parent or you. There are instances where the individual who is ill is a brother or a sister…it’s their responsibility to take care of them but our benefits don’t take that into account…” Many employees acknowledged that they had either experienced these types of events in their own lives or had witnessed co-workers struggling with these challenges, as the participant below, echoing the words of many, explained:

The thing I’ve been talking about is, when we’re talking about family we’re talking about our children or our parents or whatever. But there are people on campus that are having to deal with other family members. A girl I work with just lost a brother who had heart trouble. Never sick a day of his life, had a virus in his heart, needed a heart transplant. Her vacation was spent taking
him back and forth to the hospital. She couldn’t use her sick leave for that, like we could if it was our child or something like that. Things need to be done for people like her. At one point she had three people that were terminally ill living in her home, and she was going to school and working full-time. And she’s the only one. She just recently lost her brother. She lost them one by one, but she had to give up her vacation to care for them.

Countless other participants, both men and women, described their frustrations at the fact the University does not have formalized policies for short-term family leave and disability benefits. Many of the examples used in participant narratives to underscore the need for these benefits centered on issues of maternity. One male employee expressed his concern about the lack of paid maternity leave from his perspective as both a supervisor and an employee:

…the fact that we don’t have a paid maternity leave, and so when I have staff who go on maternity leave and the only way they can handle that is if they use up all their vacation and sick time and then go unpaid for the rest of it, to me that says that we’re not valuing what they put in. And also as a father, when I have a child, there’s that. And when my wife goes into labor, having to figure out, “Do I have enough sick time?” There’s only 12 days that I can be home with a family member who’s sick—that’s not right and it has a big effect on work-life balance.

Participants from all employee groups emphasized the need for the University to provide some level of short-term family leave and disability benefits in order to assist employees to positively manage the unexpected work-life balance challenges that are created when they or family members become pregnant, ill or are in need of care giving. For many employees, the provision of these benefits is a tangible affirmation of the extent to which they and the work they perform is valued by the University.

Expanded and Formalized Flextime Options

Expanded and formalized flextime options were a simple and yet profound benefit that was identified by focus group members as being an enormous way the University could help them manage their work-life balance. Many participants in units that already use flextime discussed the positive impact it had on their work environments, as the quote below illustrates:

For us, what is number one on work and scheduling benefit or service, setting our start and end times when people come to work. We have one young lady who works an extra hour each day, which enables us to stay open at night for students, and then takes every other Friday off. Yet another person who stays an hour at night and takes a half a day off each week. It has something to do with their families, too, so it works really well. So that one, for us, is important
Adequate Salaries

Employees for the most part recognize and appreciate the University’s efforts to increase salaries. However, nearly all employees at nearly every level of the organization also recognized that some employees did not receive reasonable salaries. In many focus groups participants discussed situations where full-time employees did not receive salaries adequate to survive without taking second jobs or relying on public assistance such as food stamps. The interconnections between salaries and work-life balance exist and, as one employee noted and others emphasized, "Making sure that all of our employees make a living wage is a public affairs issue." Several interviewees noted that “We probably lose a lot of really good people just because of money.” And nearly all participants emphasized what one employee noted, which was the “need to make salaries one of the highest work-life balance priorities, particularly for those who are below the national average for salaries in their discipline or area...” Participants also realized that increasing salaries was challenging and many of those interviewed, like the employee quoted below, had many creative suggestions for what could be done to enhance salaries:

Well, and it might be that they could just do some things for them. Maybe they can’t increase their salary, but they could increase their benefits in some way, like the deductible issue or some of the things that would make it a little easier for people at a certain level.

Accessible Affordable Day Care

Accessible and affordable day care was identified by parents of young children as being one of the most important benefits that could be provided to young parents to assist them in managing work-life balance.

Partner Benefits

It is important to note that in a significant number of focus groups when participants were asked to talk about benefits that would be important that were not listed on the benefits sheet (see Appendix F), they indicated the importance of providing partner benefits for both same-sex and never-married long-term partners. The quote from the participant below captures this concern.

One thing that’s been an issue, I know, with searches and attracting good people here, is a lack of benefits for same-sex partners. So that’s probably something that belongs on the work-life benefits somewhere. I know we’re not there yet as an institution, but I hope that someday...
**Key Finding 5: Non-Monetary Benefits Helpful in Achieving Balance**

- Enhanced Communication
- Supervisor Training
- Confidential Grievance Structures
- Respect and Appreciation

**Communication**

Examples of communication breakdowns and the perceived unwillingness of many administrators to listen were a common thread throughout the focus group interviews. Many participants talked about the challenges that a lack of communication creates for them, particularly the perceived unwillingness or inability to listen on the part of “higher ups.” The implications of this lack of communication were that employees at every level feel disenfranchised and not connected to decision making. Employees also explained that inadequate communication also created stress and additional work because oftentimes the initial communication about a policy or procedure was inaccurate and was changed multiple times before finally being clarified.

**Supervisor Training**

As is noted elsewhere in this document, supervisors were a crucial element in whether employees were able to achieve a positive work-life balance and, even in situations where policies existed to enhance employees’ abilities to positively manage work-life balance, supervisors often did not interpret these policies appropriately. Discussions about educating supervisors and communicating the existence and importance of guidelines concerning work-life balance took place throughout all of the focus groups. Suggestions for improving supervisors’ work were varied but were captured most clearly in the words of one participant who described the training they’d received at another institution and the ways in which it compared the current training for supervisors at Missouri State:

> I’d have four or five days before classes ever start where all the managers and supervisors were together to some training, and it’d be a requirement. And I don’t mean online. I think some of our online training – I hope you haven’t designed any – are worthless. I think they’re generally worthless. It’s “get it done” because they say you have to do it.

This type of comprehensive training, described by many participants, would go a long way in helping to communicate the University’s work-life policies throughout the institution and in contributing to supervisors’ effectiveness in interpreting these policies as they work with employees.
Grievance Structures

The need for employee grievance structures that “excluded the supervisor” was identified in many focus group sessions. Participants discussed how the current grievance structure helps employees with certain types of complaints (such as sexual harassment) but does nothing to help employees who are in conflict with other employees and students or who are having difficulties with their supervisors. Participants discussed in detail how a different grievance structure would be beneficial, as illustrated in one staff member’s words:

I think that, in my experience, a grievance process is something that would help. If we had a system that would allow grievances, basically, beyond something that’s related to one of the protected categories You have a place to go if you’re sexually harassed or you’re discriminated against based on your race or something like that. But if you just have a boss that’s a jerk, there’s really not much of a mechanism in place to deal with that. And the one that is in place, there’s really nobody in particular that is in charge of investigating it. Right now, I think that we could go a step further having somebody just kind of in charge of looking at those issues, because sometimes it makes a big impact on everybody in that department if there are conflicts that cannot be resolved. They may not be illegal, but they sure are making everything miserable.

Respect and Appreciation

Respect and appreciation for good work, although often intangible, were identified as a significant way that the administration could help employees manage work-life balance. As one participant, speaking particularly of staff appreciation, noted:

I don’t know if this has come up or not, but I don’t think we show – I’m speaking of staff, not faculty – we don’t show staff our appreciation very well or often enough. And you’ve got to be careful, there’s a careful balance. If every week we show appreciation, pretty soon it loses its meaning and, “OK, great, another pat on the back. Thanks, I’ve got to get my work done.” But there ought to be, other than just once a year at the Service Awards Luncheon, there ought to be other ways. And instead of being University-wide, it needs to be at the division or the departmental level, I think, to really mean something to them. I don’t have the answer for it because I probably don’t do it well, but I’d like to think I do.

By acknowledging and rewarding creative, innovative, or beyond-the-call-of-duty work staff and faculty can be recharged and motivated to continue making the extraordinary efforts that make Missouri State a great institution.
References


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