

Executive Summary UFS Ethics White Paper, “Tissues are for Students”

This white paper presents a comprehensive examination of faculty and staff burnout across the State University of New York (SUNY) system. Drawing on a multi-year study conducted by the University Faculty Senate’s Ethics and Institutional Integrity Committee, the report identifies how post-pandemic conditions, institutional decisions, rising workloads, and limited structural support have led to a system-wide decline in employee well-being. The study integrates quantitative survey data, qualitative responses, and preliminary interviews to assess the experiences of more than 1,000 SUNY faculty and staff.

Context and Scope of the Issue

Faculty and staff serve as the primary emotional and instructional support system for SUNY students, performing extensive emotional labor that is essential but often invisible and undervalued. While higher education has increasingly prioritized student well-being, employee well-being has not received equal structural attention. The COVID-19 pandemic intensified this imbalance. Faculty and staff were required to rapidly shift modalities, support distressed students, manage safety protocols, and sustain academic operations under unprecedented strain.

Respondents acknowledged that campuses acted reasonably during the height of the pandemic. However, the long-term aftermath—marked by staffing shortages, increased administrative expectations, and persistent institutional pressures—has resulted in escalating burnout, reduced autonomy, and declining morale.

Methodology

The Committee used a mixed-methods approach conducted over three years:

- Interviews and climate survey reviews (2021–2022) across several state-operated SUNY campuses.
- A large-scale survey distributed in phases from Fall 2022 to Fall 2024.
- Over 1,000 complete responses from faculty, librarians, and professional staff.
- Repeated coding of open-ended responses, supported by qualitative analysis tools.

Survey items assessed workload equity, institutional communication, administrative responsiveness, financial confidence, control over work, and perceptions of burnout. Representing nearly all SUNY sectors, the sample included respondents across ranks, genders, job categories, and years of service.

Demographic Profile of Respondents

Survey data show that the respondent group reflected broad and meaningful diversity across SUNY state-operated campuses. The following demographic patterns are especially noteworthy:

- There was an almost perfect split between faculty and librarians at 49.4 percent and professional staff at 50.6 percent.
- Faculty participants represented a balanced range of ranks including contingent faculty, pre-tenured faculty, tenured faculty, associate and full professors, and librarians.
- Professional staff respondents were similarly distributed across permanent and non-permanent roles in academic affairs, student services, and management.

- Respondents represented every SUNY sector, with the largest shares coming from the Comprehensive Colleges at 53.3 percent, University Centers at 18.1 percent, and the Technical Colleges at 13.7 percent of respondents.
- Health Centers represented 8.5 percent and Statutory and Specialized institutions represented 6.1 percent.
- Years of service were evenly distributed across categories, ranging from fewer than five years to more than twenty years.
- Women represented the clear majority of respondents at 60.6 percent, with men at 31.7 percent, nonbinary respondents at 2.2 percent, and 5.1 percent choosing not to answer.

These patterns confirm that the survey captured a broad cross section of SUNY employees while reflecting the gendered distribution of labor across higher education.

Key Findings

1. Burnout Is Widespread and Persistent

Survey and interview data confirm high levels of emotional fatigue, cynicism, disengagement, and declining sense of professional accomplishment. Respondents reported worsened sleep, heightened stress and anxiety, strained work-life balance, and increased consideration of leaving their positions or retiring early.

These patterns align with national data but reflect conditions specific to SUNY’s post-pandemic environment.

2. Workload Intensification and Inequity Are Major Drivers

- 74 percent reported increased workload due to staff or faculty departures and unfilled positions.
- 76 percent felt frequent or constant pressure to “do more with less.”
- More than 60 percent perceived workload expectations across colleagues as inequitable.

Respondents cited increased administrative burdens, larger class sizes or caps, expanded advising needs, recruitment and retention tasks, new technology systems, broader online instructional expectations, and responsibilities related to diversity, equity, and inclusion initiatives.

Many noted that emotional labor, assessment work, and service obligations often went uncompensated or unrecognized.

3. Loss of Autonomy and Control of Work are Increasing and Leading to Staff Burnout

More than half of respondents indicated that rising workload significantly reduced their sense of control over their responsibilities. Open-ended responses described:

- Difficulty maintaining quality teaching and advising.
- Chronic backlog and an inability to “catch up.”
- Regularly taking work home on nights and weekends.
- Feeling unable to decline extra duties, even when optional.

Some respondents reported that burnout had progressed to the point where they struggled to answer the survey itself.

4. Administrative Decisions Often Exacerbate Stress

Respondents increasingly perceived that campus decisions were not aligned with employee well-being:

- Fewer than 15 percent believed leaders often or always consider employee well-being.
- Over half felt that administrators seldom listen or respond to concerns.
- More than 80 percent believed upper leadership made decisions not in the best interest of faculty and staff.

Concerns focused on opaque decision-making, lack of transparency in resource allocation, expanded administrative structures despite hiring freezes, and uneven support across academic departments and staff offices. Many staff members also described fear of retaliation due to at-will employment conditions.

5. External Pressures Deepen Internal Strain

Concerns about budget instability, declining enrollment, and the demographic “cliff” were pervasive. Respondents linked these external pressures to:

- Hiring freezes and unfilled lines.
- Increased push for recruitment and retention work.
- Implementation of new SUNY-wide initiatives, such as general education changes and Brightspace adoption, during a period of already heightened strain.

Many described their experience as moving from “crisis to crisis” without relief.

6. Communication Gaps Significantly Contribute to Burnout

A large share of respondents rated communication from SUNY and campus leadership as poor or very poor. They reported:

- Frequent announcements and initiatives without sufficient practical guidance.
- Inconsistent or unclear explanations for policy decisions.
- Confusion created by shifting or contradictory directives.

These patterns eroded trust and contributed to employee frustration and anxiety.

7. Responsibility for Well-Being Is Viewed as Shared, but Burdens Are Falling on Individuals

Although 82 percent of respondents believed well-being is shared between individuals and institutions, qualitative responses made clear that many feel their campuses do little beyond offering individual-focused wellness suggestions.

Many noted that true well-being cannot be achieved through personal coping strategies alone when structural problems remain unaddressed.

Ethical Interpretation Using Pragmatic Ethical Principlism (PEP)

The Committee used PEP, a SUNY-developed ethical model, to analyze findings across seven principles: well-being, harm reduction, autonomy, personal development, relational commitments, fairness, and repair. Applying this framework revealed:

- Institutions have an ethical obligation to support employee well-being in ways that extend beyond emergency response.
- Workload inequity, declining autonomy, and chronic overextension represent ongoing institutional harm.
- Fairness and relational trust have eroded.
- Repairing damage is essential and requires deliberate institutional action rather than reliance on individual resilience.

PEP emphasizes that ethical practice must be lived consistently through decisions, policies, and long-term commitments.

Core Recommendations

The report identifies several ethically grounded actions for SUNY and its campuses:

1. Elevate employee well-being as a formal institutional priority, comparable to student success.
2. Increase transparency and establish consistent workload standards across roles and campuses.
3. Strengthen supervisor training centered on ethical leadership and employee support.
4. Use restorative practices to rebuild trust and address lingering post-pandemic impacts.
5. Reinforce shared governance, ensuring faculty and staff input in decisions affecting their work.
6. Develop long-term professional development and retention strategies, especially in the face of demographic and budget challenges.
7. Ensure equity across identity groups, roles, and campus types to address disparities.
8. Continue systematic data collection to monitor changes over time.

These actions aim to stabilize morale, reduce burnout, and preserve SUNY's ability to serve its public mission.

Conclusion

The white paper concludes that burnout among SUNY faculty and staff constitutes a growing structural and ethical crisis. While pandemic-era responses were generally viewed as adequate under the circumstances, the years that followed have brought intensified workloads, reduced support, and broader institutional strain. Without systemic, ethically grounded interventions, burnout threatens employee retention, student success, and the sustainability of SUNY's mission.

Respondents emphasized that they cannot navigate additional crises without relief from the unresolved crises they already face. The report calls for institutional changes that meaningfully support those who make higher education possible.