Bearing the Burden

Staff Wages at SWAT

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When people think of Swarthmore, the words “faculty” and “students” often come to mind. But Swarthmore also includes another group essential to the well-being of the college community: staff. This week’s article is the first of a two-part series that offers an in-depth look at several key aspects of the staffing experience.

By Sonia Scherr  Phoenix Staff

Despite increased attention to staffing issues at Swarthmore in the last few years, many staff have concerns regarding their salaries, training and education opportunities for advancement, and role in college governance. The general consensus among staff members seems to be that their concerns are not taken as seriously as student and faculty concerns, and that they are not always sufficiently valued by the college.

Out of the more than 500 non-faculty staff at Swarthmore, fifteen were interviewed for this article, of whom all but two asked to remain anonymously. The interview and focus on staff salaries and wages. Next, Environmental Services, Physical Plant, McCabe Library and various administrative positions. Although concerns differed widely between departments and individuals, wages, training and education were mentioned as problem areas by a majority of the staff interviewed. Most felt that staff issues are not consistently given the priority they deserve.

These findings trend to support the results of a survey administered to 187 staff, or 23 percent of the total staff workforce, by the Staff Compensation Committee (SAC) in late 1998. Seventy percent of survey respondents felt that receiving fair pay “relative to other employees in their market unit” was “one of the five most critical issues” or a “fairly important issue.” Moreover, 40 percent of respondents believed receiving fair pay relative to other employees in the market, a “critical” or “fairly important,” issue and approximately equal percentage said that merit-based pay was similarly important.

In the realm of education, 36 percent of respondents placed support for learning opportunities unrelated to one’s job as the “critical” or “fairly important” category. And 55 percent of respondents indicated that the level of regard given to staff concerns relative to faculty concerns was considered low in the priority category.

On the other hand, most of the staff interviewed expressed a desire for further education and training limited prospects of their work experience. Much of the college’s pleasure, safe work environment and described an excellent relationship with their immediate supervisor.

This week’s in-depth article, the first in a two-part series, provides a brief history of staff concerns at Swarthmore and their advocates. Next week’s article will cover training and opportunities for advancement, the grievance procedure and recruitment, and Human Resources and the role of staff in college governance.

In recent years, staff have increasingly voiced their concerns. Although the College staff has never been unionized, in the fall of 1991, two years after a report by the Middle States Accreditation team reported the college felt it was “underpaid and underutilized,” nine administrative assistants formed the Ad Hoc Salary Concerns Committee. In the fall of 1996, a group of administrative assistants circulated a survey across several of the Ad HoC committees, outlined a series of concerns regarding salary and benefits, and they subsequently brought to Provost Jenie Keith and former Director of Human Resources, Tom Callahan.

This action prompted the college to respond to one of the group’s concerns—the inaccessibility of staff salary structure to employees. The college began publishing the minimum pay and Fair Market Rate (FMR). In the fall of 1997, the Loop Range Planning Committee Sub Group on Staff Issues (PSG) convened for the first of a series of monthly meetings.

This group represents the first time in the history of the college that staffing has been the focus of a major planning endeavor. According to the Accreditation Self-Study prepared for the 1999 Middle States Accreditation evaluation team, “...with the exception of the highest rungs of the staff, the College has focused very little strategic thinking on the non-faculty support.”

In the fall of 1998, the college proposed changes to the benefits program by the college's “staff bill of rights.” These rights included the need for job evaluations, a living wage, a revised grievance procedure, increased support for training and education and more opportunities for staff to play a role in college governance.

Many of these issues would be considered by the PSG during the course of the planning process. Moreover, the letter also led to the restructuring of SAC, an elected body of staff representatives.

The efforts of the PSG culminated in its Accreditation Self-Study Report and the creation of a series of new committees and staff members interviewed felt that they earned less than those in similar positions at other businesses and institutions.

“We’re underpaid,” one employee stated. In recent years, the college has taken action to investigate and correct this problem. Spurred by the findings of the 1989 Middle States evaluation team, the college analyzes the college's salary structure and found average staff salaries below the FMR. The college has since adopted an increase determined as 100 percent of the FMR, for Vice President for Finance and Planning Paul Aslanian.

This strategy of setting compensation at 100 percent of FMR means that the college is paying employees at the 50th percentile of market wages. In other words, half of the employees in the general staff earn at least half earn less than Swarthmore staff members.

Nevertheless, employees interviewed felt that many staff members do not earn the market average, particularly those in lower-level service positions. “The perception in that many, many employees remain below the FMR,” said Meredith Heg's '90, coordinator of the Student Labor Action Group (SLAG). Heg found it “particularly offensive” that many of these employees work in areas essential for the function of the college.

The SAC survey also indicated that a substantial majority of employees would consider resigning if wages they received relative to what they could earn in jobs outside the college. Fifty-seven percent disagreed with the statement that “in their work unit, staff are paid fairly for the level of experience they provide and for the contributions (they) make,” compared to wages available in the market.

All workers with satisfactory employment records should reach the FMR after 3-5 years of employment at Swarthmore, said Aslanian in the Dec. 10, 1999 issue of The Phoenix.

The college routinely channels additional funds into staff compensation, if it finds that wages do not meet the FMR in some areas, explained Aslanian. (The standard yearly wage raise equals the amount of inflation plus an additional 1.5 percent.) For example, this year, out of $410,000 set aside to support new programs, $300,000 were used to augment the staff budget. After discovering that it had failed to meet the market average by $44,000 in several employment categories, the college pumped an additional $50,000 into wage increases.

Aslanian said that a recent study conducted by Treasury Susan Weeks, found that, over the past decade, the college has allocated an additional $1.5 million for its staff compensation. “This indicates that our standard inflationary and 1.5 percent increases — as compared to 1.6 million for faculty.

Aslanian believes that this allocation of funds refutes the widespread perception among staff that faculty salary spending is substantially higher than staff salary spending. On the contrary, Aslanian, the total staff salary budget is larger than the total faculty salary bud- get.

But Swarthmore's staff salary expenditures remain below those of many schools belonging to the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COPHE), according to a May 1997 COPHE report. The report showed that, at 1.57, the ratio of Swarthmore's non-faculty salary budget to its faculty salary budget lagged behind the ratios of all 17 schools in the study with the exception of one. The ratios ranged from a low of 1.07 to 1.10 to a high of 2.01 to 1 with a mean of 1.5 to 1.

The Accreditation Self-Study hypothesized that Swarthmore’s comparatively low spending ratio might result from its difference in enrollment, a difference in faculty to student ratio. “Swarthmore may deliberately weight its human resources cost more heavily toward faculty and less toward staff, in order to be able to provide an exceptional student academic experience,” said Aslanian.

Swarthmore was in the middle of COPHE schools...
The issue of how the college should define the market for staff also requires consideration, said psychology professor Barry Schwartz. "While faculty and senior administrators are recruited nationally and paid based on ongoing comparison of similar institutions across the country, staff are recruited locally," explained Schwartz. "Should we just be using the average wage for various jobs in the local labor market to set our standards or something else?"

Some staff members wonder whether Swarthmore's salary compensation is high enough to attract exceptional employees and keep them at the college. "It is becoming ever-increasingly difficult to recruit and retain knowledgeable staff," stated a staff member who has had supervisory experience.

The findings of the Self-Study provide support for this perception. "Swarthmore's current staff compensation strategy appears insufficient to attract the quality of workforce it may need to sustain excellence," the study said.

Indeed, Aslanian stated that Swarthmore has an "inordinately good" fringe benefits package for all staff working at least three-quarters time. Medical benefits total $600, of which $200 cover in- divisibles, health insurance, and $200 covers a benefit bank that employees may take in the form of cash, according to Aslanian. He pointed out that total cash from the benefit bank translates to an additional dollar per hour above employees' standard salary compensation. If this was taken into account when comparing employees' wages to the market average, it would drive staff pay up above 100 percent of the FAIR.

Moreover, the college's recent revamping of its retirement plan, available to all employees working at least half time, has resulted in better benefits for employees in lower salary ranges. The Faculty and Staff Benefits Committee increased the amount of money available for staff training and professional development. Faculty were also allocated for graduate work, which previously did not receive support from the college.

Virtually all of the staff members interviewed were pleased with their benefits. An overwhelming majority of the surveyed staff agreed that the medical, retirement, vacation, sick and holiday benefits were "basically good" compared to those offered by other employers. An exception was the accuracy of the 100 percent figure, suggesting that the college may compensate some of its staff above this standard when other factors are taken into account. One problem is that the college has not gathered sufficient evidence to make an informed conclusion about its staff salaries relative to the market. "It's not clear that the story is being told the way it should be told," Westphal said. "And the heavy armament it would require from a small school like Swarthmore. But, he added, "I don't think that the college has taken the time to have an honest conversation about where matters lie."

The college has made progress in addressing the pay issue, more slowly than many would have hoped, he added. "I haven't seen results," said one employee, who acknowledged the college may not have had time to act on its recommendations.

"Wages are lower than they should be, and while the college has been moving consistently to fix this problem, I don't think it has been moving as fast as it should," the employee said. Although the college has more closely linked performance to compensation, "the college staff and faculty agreed that the college has made progress in addressing the pay issue, more slowly than many would have hoped, he added.

In summary, most staff agreed that the college has made progress in addressing the pay issue, more slowly than many would have hoped, he added. "I haven't seen results," said one employee, who acknowledged the college may not have had time to act on its recommendations.

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Staff wage problems

The college's policy toward staff salaries is fundamentally flawed.

Firstly, the policy is ill-defined. The staff pay structure have been described as "arbitrary," with newly hired employees sometimes earning more than veteran staff. There is no formal evaluation procedure and hence little incentive to perform well, despite overwhelming approval from staff for just such a measure. Staff members at Swarthmore College are generally dismayed and in the dark when it comes to salaries, and this attitude of befuddlement often grows to a general sentiment.

For a college that generally responds to student and faculty opinion, the staff salaries policy is also conspicuously anti-Swarthmore. Why is it that a committee formed by members of the Swarthmore staff with issues affecting their well-being was unable to influence policy?

Part of the reason is that the lines of communication between the staff and college officials are strained. But even so, the college cannot have ignored the data that have flowed in. Faculty are paid 102.5 percent of the average among top liberal arts colleges and 125 percent of the average among all colleges; staff members are paid 100 percent, but only in the last few years has the college ensured compensation at the fair market price.

The college is clearly sending a mixed message. As ironic as it sounds, the college should form a committee to suggest tangible improvements to ensure fair treatment of all in its community. Speaking as members of that community, we feel it is the least we can do.