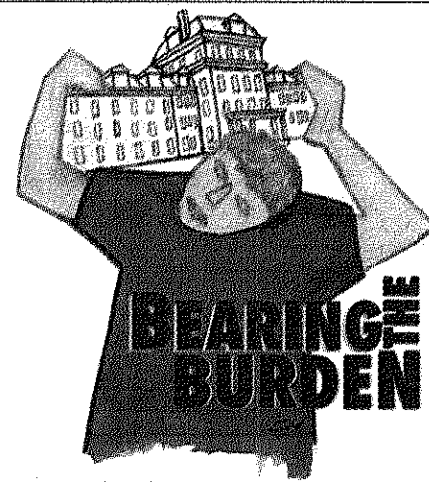


PART TWO: STAFF RESOURCES

By Sonia Scherr | Phoenix



Although they often work "behind-the-scenes," the contributions of Swarthmore staff enable the college to function. This week's article is the second in a two-part series that provides an in depth look at key aspects of the staff experience.



More than a year after a long range planning committee completed the first ever major study of staffing issues, many staff continue to have concerns regarding wages, training and education, opportunities for advancement and staff influence in college governance.

Out of a workforce of more than 500 staff, fifteen were interviewed for this article, of whom all but two asked to remain partly anonymous. The staff interviewed work in Environmental Services, McCabe Library, Physical Plant, and various administrative positions. Their top concerns were compensation, training and education. Many staff also felt that their concerns are not always taken seriously enough by the college. These findings were consistent with the results of a 1998 Staff Advisory Committee (SAC) survey completed by 37 percent of the staff workforce. Nevertheless, staff also emphasized the positive aspects of their work experience, such as job security and a pleasant work environment.

This week's article — the second in a two-part series that examines staffing issues at the college — discusses training and educational opportunities, the grievance policy, human resources and the staff role in college governance. Last week's article provided a historical perspective on staffing issues and focused on staff wages.

Training and Education

Training and educational opportunities ranked only slightly behind wages as one of the top concerns among staff, though the college has recently made efforts to increase its support in these areas.

Several employees lamented the lack of training in many staff departments at the college.

"People are looking for more in-house training," said one staff member, who reported that there is little ongoing training in his department.

The results of the SAC survey suggested that this dissatisfaction was widespread. Fifty-seven percent of respondents "strongly disagreed" and an additional 21 percent "disagreed" that the college offered sufficient opportunities for training and professional development that could directly benefit job performance.

The 1998 Accreditation Self-Study prepared by the Long-Range Planning Committee Sub-Group on Staffing Issues (PSG) for the Middle States Evaluation Team pointed to a basic lack of training for all staff at the college, especially in the area of technology. "Progressive organizations in 1998 commit 2 percent to 4 percent of their staff salary budget to training and professional development, significantly more than what the college currently allocates," said the study.

The study also reported that, unlike similar departments at many other organizations, Swarthmore's Human Resources (HR) Department does not have an established staff training function. It went on to suggest that Swarthmore "dramatically enhance" training for staff at all levels and in all areas of the college.

In addition to training, a few employees were disgruntled by inadequate support for continuing education in areas both directly and indirectly related to their jobs. Just over half the respondents to the SAC survey shared this view.

"There should be 100 percent reimbursement for employees furthering knowledge that will help them in their positions," said one employee. "If we are the number one college, we need the number one staff."

The college's mission as an institution of learning suggests that it should support general education for all members of its community, argued another staff member.

The self-study, which noted that the college offered "nominal" support for undergraduate education and no support for graduate studies, recommended that the college bolster its support for educational opportunities ranging from basic literacy skills and GED classes to graduate work.

In response to these recommendations and to staff input, the Faculty and Staff Benefits Committee increased spending this fall for staff professional development and educational work, including graduate studies.

Although psychology professor Barry Schwartz acknowledged the "inadequate opportunities for training and professional development," he felt that this problem reflects

Swarthmore's lack of "verticality" in its staff structure, which permits "very little room for advancement."

"While we can certainly provide opportunities for, say, administrative assistants to acquire new skills, they will still pretty much be stuck being administrative assistants," explained Schwartz. "This might prove to be quite frustrating, as people become more and more overqualified for the work they do."

Indeed, the SAC survey showed that 64 percent of respondents did not believe they were "likely" to advance within their work unit, as compared to 12 percent who did. The remaining 24 percent had "no real opinion" or did not feel that the issue applied to them.

The self-study also mentioned the limited promotional opportunities available in many staffing areas, attributing this situation to the "flat, decentralized, and specialized nature of work" at Swarthmore.

While the dearth of advancement possibilities may be inherent in Swarthmore's employment structure, it also places the college in a difficult position. "Does the college want to... prepare [employees] for advancement, even if this means sending them off to another employer?" asked the self-study.

But when higher-level jobs do become available in their area of employment, some staff members complained that the college tends to hire an outside person to fill the position rather than train a current employee.

"Their solution to everything is to put in a new face, [even when] there's a good employee who needs to advance but can't because there's no means for training," said one staff member.

For those who are promoted to managerial positions, the college provides little or no supervisory training, according to many of the staff and faculty interviewed.

Professor and Chair of the Department of Physics & Astronomy Peter Collings, who oversees several employees, believes that the managerial staff "varies tremendously" in terms of the instruction, support and feedback they provide to those under their supervision. "In the end, employees with different supervisors are often given different instructions and so conduct their work according to different rules," said Collings, who also emphasized that Swarthmore is not a business organization and that its supervisors generally are not professional administrators.

But, he added, placing great stress on his first word, "If... sound policies can be developed that everyone can understand and follow, it might lessen the unevenness."

The self-study confirmed the current lack of training for supervisors, noting "that many campus managers have been promoted into their positions without any supervisory training."

Despite these problems, several employees mentioned the ways in which the college has supported their educational endeavors.

Yvette Johnson, who works in Dining Services, was pleased that for the past two years she has been able to arrange her work schedule in order to take classes at the college.

Another employee commended the college for giving her several paid hours every week to participate in Learning for Life, a program in which Swarthmore students tutor staff in literacy and computer skills.

The college will continue to take steps to augment staff training and educational opportunities in the near future, according to Vice President of Finance and Planning Paul Aslanian. Aslanian hopes to create a new position in Human Resources that will handle staff training and development. Moreover, the current \$200 million capital campaign includes a \$5 million fund earmarked for staff educational and training opportunities.

The Grievance Policy

The grievance policy is one area in which Swarthmore has made significant progress, according to most of the staff and faculty interviewed.

The college is currently in the final stages of implementing a substantially revised grievance policy intended to be more responsive to staff needs. Steve O'Connell, chair of the Equal Opportunity (EO) Committee, and Bradshaw, the newly hired EO officer, explained that this policy differs from the existing one in that it contains specific and clear procedures for handling nondiscrimination type grievances. Moreover, the revised

policy no longer places the onus on grievants to try to work out problems with their offenders.

"I think this is a really positive step forward for staff," said O'Connell, who added that the true test of the policy's merit will occur once it is implemented. "[We need to see if staff find it] usable, protective of their interests, and reasonably effective, and whether supervisors and others think it's constructive. [But] I think it has a very good chance."

The revisions started in 1998, when former Director of Human Resources Barbara Carroll began collaborating with a sub-committee of senior staff to develop an improved version of the grievance policy published in the staff handbook. In what O'Connell termed a "very open" process, Carroll presented drafts of the revised policy to the EOC, SAC and the Administrative Advisory Committee (AAC) in late 1998 and again in early 1999. Carroll used the feedback from these committees to rewrite each draft. The final grievance policy, which should be formally promulgated later this semester, currently awaits "finetuning" from Bradshaw, according to O'Connell.

Bradshaw said she plans to promote awareness of the revised grievance procedure by distributing informational leaflets and by meeting with staff.

Another related change is that, with Bradshaw's hiring, the college expanded the functions of the EO Office to include handling complaints that do not involve discrimination issues. For the first time, staff may choose whether to take such complaints to the EO officer or to the Employee Relations officer, who traditionally addressed non-EO grievances. While emphasizing the "collaborative" relationship between the two positions, O'Connell suggested that some staff may feel more comfortable discussing their concerns with the EO officer, whose position is distinct from Human Resources.

"The Equal Opportunity Office creates a safe space that didn't exist before for staff to explore other [non-EO] grievances," said O'Connell.

Bradshaw, who serves half-time as the EO officer and half-time as a recruitment officer, explained that her other major goal involves collaborating with Human Resources to diversify the staff workforce. The self-study reported that African-Americans have more representation in lower and higher staff positions and comparatively less representation in mid-level positions, while other minorities tend to be under-represented at all levels of staff employment.

Despite being on the job for only several months, Bradshaw reported that "a lot of people are using the [EO] Office so far." Staff members stop by to discuss specific problems or simply to find out about services offered through her office.

"I don't turn anyone away," said Bradshaw. "All staff concerns are relevant."

Human Resources: Looking for Leadership

The lack of a HR Director has slowed the effort to address many staff concerns. The top position in HR has been vacant since last March, when Barbara Carroll resigned after less than three years on the job. A search committee has interviewed its final candidates for the position, and the college is now "within days" of hiring a new HR director, said Aslanian.

"There should be 100 percent reimbursement for employees furthering knowledge that will help them in their positions. If we are the number one college, we need the number one staff."

Like other staffing issues at Swarthmore, Human Resources has received a stronger commitment from the college only in recent years. The self-study reported that "the college has had, as part of its culture, a default position that dollars not spent directly on students or faculty are dollars not well spent. Human Resources is a good example of this 'neglect'."

Human Resource's function was limited to payroll until the mid-1970s, when the college hired a personnel assistant to the associate controller, according to the self-study and Lee Robinson, associate director of employee relations. The first personnel director of Human Resources was hired in 1978. Since then, the department has grown to encompass a variety of functions, including staff recruitment, wages and benefits, employee relations and payroll.

Without a director for nearly a year, the current HR department has been compelled to set aside virtually all major projects, according to Aslanian and Robinson. Aslanian commended the HR staff, who have taken on considerable extra work, "for their incredible effort to keep the good ship Human Resources afloat." The larger college community has generally been "pretty understanding," added Aslanian.

Nevertheless, several of the staff and faculty interviewed acknowledged that the situation is far from ideal.

"[Not having a director] has definitely thrown a monkey wrench into [staff-related projects]," said one staff member.

Economics professor Larry Westphal feared that Carroll's departure could complicate the effort to implement the PSG recommendations. According to Westphal, who also served on the PSG, Carroll was well-informed about the underlying discussion behind the PSG recommendations and was one of the only committee members whose job involved translating that discussion into policy. "The po-

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tency of some of the [PSG] discussion may be lost [because of Carroll's departure]," said Westphal.

Carroll's resignation is part of a larger pattern of turnover that has

plagued Human Resources in the past decade. Her predecessor, who was hired in 1992, left three years later.

"The personnel situation hasn't stabilized," said Westphal. "We need someone committed to the college who can function for a long period within the college environment."

To combat this turnover and to ensure a highly-qualified applicant pool, Swarthmore has invested funds to upgrade the HR Director to Associate Vice President of Human Resources, according to Aslanian. "The staff area is large enough to justify the effort to attract the very best candidate," he said.

But Westphal felt that it has taken longer than it should to find this candidate. "In the context of all that went on in the PSG, one might say that it's been very disappointing how long it's taken to move toward the replacement of Barbara Carroll," said Westphal, who was careful to acknowledge various mitigating factors involved.

Aslanian and Robinson did not agree that the replacement process has taken unduly long. The college took the unusual step of hiring a search firm to accelerate the search for a new director, said Aslanian, who explained that typical searches usually last about seven months.

The college's HR search committee, which includes significant staff representation, narrowed its choice of candidates to two finalists prior to winter break. The committee delayed having the candidates come to campus until after the break so they could experience the college while it was in session.

"We want the community to support this position," said Aslanian.

Staff Governance

The role of staff in college decision-making is likely to be one of the issues that the new HR director will address. Many of the staff interviewed felt that their views do not receive as much consideration as they would like.

Kae Kalwaic, an administrative assistant in the education department, said staff are not given fair representation on relevant committees. A strong proponent of consensus, Kalwaic described Swarthmore's gov-

ernance as a "top-down" system in which decisions tend to be handed down from the upper levels.

Kalwaic supports more staff representation on all committees, not just those dealing directly with staffing issues. "Staff would offer a fresh perspective," she said. "Every decision made affects everybody else."

Aslanian and Robinson pointed out that staff serve on eight committees, three of which wield the most economic power of all committees on campus: the College Budget Committee, the College Planning Committee and the Faculty and Staff Benefits Committee.

Moreover, SAC and AAC, which are elected committees of staff, have become increasingly strong voices for their constituents, said Aslanian.

Formed in 1998, SAC states its mission "is to represent staff concerns to the administration, to serve as a liaison between the staff and senior administration, and to advocate on behalf of the Swarthmore staff." SAC, which meets regularly with members of senior staff, has worked on a variety of staffing issues, including tuition reimbursement, compensation and "improving overall communications on campus."

Schwartz felt that staff are "well-represented" on committees that deal with issues pertaining to them. "If there is a perception among staff of inadequate representation, it may be because there are inadequate channels of communication among staff."

Indeed, one employee characterized the communication between staff members in lower-level positions and middle management as "very poor." Meetings tend to be held only when something goes wrong, said the employee, which prevents staff members from giving regular feedback that would affect decision making.

While acknowledging that the college is currently trying to increase communication among staff, Schwartz emphasized that it is not "an easy problem." For instance, the college cannot schedule meetings during the paid workday that all staff are free to attend.

One employee believes, however, that staff can counteract the communication problem by making sure their voices are heard. "It's up to staff to convey their concerns and opinions to middle management in the hope that these concerns and opinions will move up [to senior staff]."

"We have to realize that our main concern as staff... is to provide a service to students and faculty," he added. "Understanding [that] will make it easier for staff to communicate their needs and wants to management."

Several of those interviewed wondered whether the views of staff serving on committees were sufficiently valued during the decision-making process.

"They try to keep staff on committees... [but] I'm not sure if staff participation on them is weighted as much as we would like," said one employee who has served on a college committee. She and Meredith Hegg '00, coordinator of the Student Labor Action Group (SLAG), observed that staff are not always appointed to committees in a timely manner.

Although Schwartz said "there is no question that staff are not 'equal' in importance to faculty and students in the eyes of the institution," he felt that staff concerns are "taken seriously" in the context of committee discussions. As a former associate provost who served on various committees involving staff issues, Schwartz maintained that "[the staff] perspective on things is always considered when decisions are made."

Nevertheless, Schwartz acknowledged that the heterogeneous nature of the staff workforce complicates the effort to address the concerns of all staff members. "Sometimes, policy that is perceived as not being responsive to staff concerns may actually be policy that is responsive to the concerns of one segment of the staff but not others," he said.

Still, the general consensus among the staff interviewed was that their concerns are not always given fair consideration compared to faculty and student concerns.

"If you have concerns, you can go to anyone," said one staff member. "... But will your concerns be [treated] with equal importance as student or faculty concerns? The answer is, 'No.'"

The staff workforce seemed to share this viewpoint. Sixty-six percent of respondents to the SAC survey felt that staff concerns did not receive sufficient attention relative to faculty concerns. A slightly smaller percentage felt the same way when staff concerns were compared to student concerns.

Thompson Bradley, professor and chair of the modern languages department, agreed that issues important to staff do not consistently receive the priority they deserve. "Faculty needs and wants — and student needs and wants — have always been first. Staff needs and wants have been last," asserted Thompson. "... [Consequently,] staff feel neglected at best."

Many of the staff interviewed cited examples of this perceived neglect.

"At face value they try to make you feel appreciated, but in reality they could do a better job," said one staff member. "In general, there's a feeling that some of management [tacitly implies] that if you don't like it here, you can go somewhere else, that we're easily replaceable."

According to President Al Bloom, however, "if that perception exists, it's a misperception. The college deeply values its staff and the essential contribution each makes to

Swarthmore's educational mission. It consistently strives to assure that each member of the staff is treated fairly and with respect, feels ownership in the community, and derives satisfaction from his or her work here."

Aslanian agreed with Bloom's assessment. "A flourishing, successful college has at its core faculty and students," said Aslanian. But he also felt that staff are crucial to its success. "What would happen if there

were no one to run the heating plant?" asked Aslanian, who went on to list the numerous jobs staff perform. "We wouldn't have much of a college," he concluded.

Aslanian and Bloom added that the college will never be able to satisfy all its staff members. "Within a staff of over 500 individuals there will always be concerns that need to be addressed," said Bloom. "Unfortunately there are... apt to be sources of dissatisfaction that cannot ever be fully resolved."

Nevertheless, most of the staff interviewed acknowledged that, particularly in recent years, the college has responded to their feedback.

"Our concerns have been taken very seriously by senior staff and followed up on," said John Scalo, who works in Physical Plant. "The outcome of the follow-up is not always what some people want [it] to be, but... our concerns have not been swept under the rug."

In a written statement, SAC said, "Al Bloom and the President's staff... all have really listened and responded to our concerns and interests.... We know much remains to be done, but we have found Al and the rest of the administration sincere about making staff members feel that they are valued and fully enfranchised members of the community."

The Future of Staff Issues

Many of the staffing issues discussed in the PSG — including wages, training and education and staff representation — will be addressed by the new HR director, said Aslanian. The college will use the PSG recommendations as a "roadmap document" for implementing future policy. Aslanian implied, however, that Swarthmore's emphasis on consensus may mean that these changes will not happen as fast as many would like.

"This [process] must be done in style," said Aslanian. "Consensus... means that nothing gets done real fast but it's worth it because everybody has a chance to participate."

Meanwhile, Aslanian said the college followed up on one of the major recommendations in the report from the Middle States Evaluation Team by hiring a consultant last spring to study staff concerns.

Aslanian believes that these efforts, as well as those Swarthmore has made in areas such as wages, the grievance policy and Human Resources, show that the college appreciates its staff. "It's pretty clear that Swarthmore looks at the relationship between the college and its staff as much more than an arms-length economic relationship," he said.

One staff member would hope this is the case. "Staff... do perform excellently and like to be treated as full members of the college community," she said.

But despite expressing concerns in several areas, the majority of staff interviewed were quick to point out the positive aspects of their work experience at Swarthmore. Several cited the college's "laid back" work environment, which compares favorably to what they encountered in private industry jobs. Another staff member emphasized that his department provides him with all the tools necessary to do his job effectively. Many stated that their immediate supervisors are not only considerate but also "like family." Still others appreciated the generous benefits and relatively high degree of job security offered by the college.

The SAC survey also indicated that a large majority of respondents were satisfied with their supervisors, felt that their work environment was "safe" and thought their benefits were "basically good."

"Some of the people who complain the most have been here a long time and have forgotten what the real world is like," said one staff member. "[At Swarthmore] we have job security [and] a beautiful campus."

But, he added, "there are a few things to be done to make things better."

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