

Dealing with the Furlough

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Overview

All of us at CSUF are concerned about the impact of furloughs on our professional and personal lives this year and perhaps beyond. The furloughs impact our campus in many ways. Some staff, faculty and administrators are finding themselves in personal financial difficulty. In some cases this is leading to people being unable to afford to continue to work at CSUF. We have lost good people already. Students are also going to be affected as faculty cut classes and workload, and staff and administrators take scheduled furlough days. Combined with fee hikes, enrollment limits, and other consequences of budget cuts, this may delay student progress to graduation. In addition, the stigma of being a University requiring employees to take furloughs is likely to reduce our success in hiring for years to come. The overall perception of the Cal State system, including our campus, could suffer.

We must take time to assure there is in place a process of eliciting ideas about how to mitigate the effects of our budgetary challenges. It is absolutely no one's intent that we will do the same amount of work in fewer hours. We will simply have to lower some of our expectations.

A university is a complex institution with a wide variety of responsibilities of faculty and staff, who often work under myriad conditions and expectations. It is important that we take into account the variety of conditions and expectations because economic uncertainty can lead to an even greater level of stress than would otherwise be the case. Naturally, there will be misunderstandings as one group of employees sees another receiving different treatment, even though that difference is qualitative, not quantitative.

Some examples:

- Faculty may perceive that they are working the same hours with less pay.
- Other staff see administrators with large salaries not having to suffer as much.
- Some staff see faculty as getting what appear to be special benefits such as travel, unsupervised hours, etc.
- Public safety personnel will not be placed on furlough.
- And, some on campus may see the trades as being able to earn overtime while others aren't.

But, rather than focusing on making sure that the pain of furloughs is spread evenly, it will be imperative for the university community to come together to support one another's differing missions.

What can we do?

For starters, a higher volume of clear communication is required. While communication most often starts at the top, for it to be meaningful, it must go in several directions, up and down and laterally. Needed information does not always follow administrative structures.

An August focus group with staff in Academic Affairs revealed those concerns. A follow-up just recently indicated that while the intent of lowering the workload was sincere, in actual fact furloughs may be contributing to an increase in work because of the necessary staff work associated with both the completion of forms and the increased student traffic in offices because of faculty absences.

Similarly, the Academic Senate wants to make sure that there is transparency and clarity in communication with the faculty on furloughs, budget cuts, and related issues. There was unanimous concern for better communication in these uncertain times. It must take place at all levels.

Now, remember, communication has both cognitive and affective components. It is not sufficient to just put out black and white cognitive information such as the specified furlough days, who will staff essential offices that will remain open on those days, etc. Administration needs to solicit faculty and staff input, demonstrating the importance of a collaborative process in decision-making.

How can we make a difference? For starters, as much as it seems corny, we all should attempt to maintain an overall positive attitude. Our students, staff, and colleagues all look to us for guidance and focus. We must realize that this situation poses challenges for everyone, and not become overly focused on our own difficulties. At the same time, we need to be compassionate since this situation is going to cause very real pain and suffering

to many. But we can't let the exigencies of today endanger the working environment of tomorrow. We need to focus on the future. Budget crises have a way of making any institution focus much more strongly on what its core values and responsibilities are and how to assure they are satisfied.

Let us keep in mind: the furlough is a fact and it's not going away this year. There's no gain in rehashing old news. Our concern is how best to handle a trying circumstance, not the perceived cause of the circumstance itself. We have little power to effect the underlying causes of the furlough: California's dysfunctional constitution for example, though we should pressure our representatives and lobby for increased funding, stressing the importance the CSU plays in the future of California's economy and civil society.

What then can be done? What follows is a rather idealistic discussion. Despite the fact that many of these goals lie outside the power of those of us who work at this institution, it is useful to consider how furloughs should actually be dealt with in an ideal sense.

The first challenge we face is financial hardship. From a faculty perspective, this could best be remedied by increasing intersession and summer teaching availability as much as possible to help make up extra pay. Down the road, as a new contract is negotiated, it would be in the best interest of the CSUs to lobby the Chancellor's office to restore pay levels to where they currently should be if our prior negotiated raises had been honored, as the next contract is written. Future pay raises also should be delinked from the State budget to ensure financial security.

Faculty retention is going to be a serious problem. While there is no guaranteed solution to this, some helpful measures would include granting more assigned time for faculty with active research programs or those involved heavily in service activity. Increasing the amounts and number of intramural grant opportunities would also help.

Faculty morale is one of the hardest things to fix during and after the current crisis, but the various steps outlined above to ease financial hardship and improve retention would do much to restore morale. Further steps include communicating to the faculty that reduced workload is a part of the furlough program, and demonstrating flexibility with the RTP process.

CSUF itself is also challenged by the very nature of furloughs. Our reputation is likely to suffer. There are steps that can be taken to improve the quality and reputation of the institution however. These include attempting to retain as many junior faculty as possible, increased searches in 2 or 3 years to make up for shortfall during the budget crisis, improving SFR, standardizing more assigned time for faculty research and service, pushing for increased external funding, and in the long term attempting to reduce the average teaching load for all faculty.

Sometimes omitted from this discussion is the recognition of the impacts that furloughs have on students. Some suggestions to alleviate student impacts include increasing intersession and summer offerings targeted at facilitating graduation, having the Colleges take a close look at departmental offerings for the purpose of ensuring that they reflect student needs for timely graduation, and making sure that when faculty reduce course meeting times or workload that courses still maintain their learning objectives.

Taking these steps will certainly help make a very tough situation easier for us all.



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