The Importance of Non-Academic Staff

Non-Academic staff members are professional employees who contribute very significantly to the success of Queen’s. As noted in the Queen’s University Staff Association’s submission to the Academic Planning process, staff bring to the University an important repertoire of professional skills, possess a wealth of institutional knowledge, provide essential resources, and work alongside of faculty and Administration in realizing the University’s mission. Many have served through several administrations and numerous leadership changes at the departmental level. This long-term experience gives them invaluable expertise and lends consistency to the daily operations of the University. Their input and opinions are vital to many of our decision-making processes.

The contribution of non-academic staff highly impacts the student experience at Queen’s University. While faculty support our students academically and in research, our staff make equally important contributions toward the success of Queen’s students through many critical support and operational services. Staff members guide our students through admission and registration processes, issue scholarship and awards, orient them to the University, facilitate residence life programming, monitor their completion progress, deliver innumerable non-academic learning opportunities and help prepare them for their next career stage. Staff members, serving in our academic departments or in our student service units, are usually the first point of contact for numerous students who need assistance in one form or another. It goes without saying that there are perhaps very few students whose positive experience at Queen’s did not include the contributions of one or more members of our non-academic staff.

For this reason, and because implementation of new policies falls largely upon them, staff are often the first to see and feel the real challenges facing Queen’s. This cuts two ways: strained financial resources, increasing enrolment, increasing regulation and accountability, innovations in technology, and the downloading of responsibilities all add to the workload and stress of staff members. But it also means that staff are positioned best to know where the stresses in the system reside. Not only can they identify what is broken and needs fixing; in many cases they have valuable insight into how it might be fixed. That said, their opinions are sometimes undervalued. Some feel they are treated as second-class citizens to faculty members and are marginalized when important decisions are made.

In “Imagining the Future,” the Academic Writing Team suggests, among other goals, that Queen’s learn to value non-academic staff as crucial for the central missions of the university. It makes many recommendations in this regard that we endorse:

At any university, the non-academic staff performs a vital role in ensuring the smooth operations of the institution. Staff at Queen’s are by and large enthusiastically engaged and dedicated to the overall mission of the university. We need to value this strength and enable staff to achieve maximum productivity.

This requires that the non-academic staff be supported as a crucial human resource for Queen’s. Careful attention needs to be paid to the creation and maintenance of a healthy
workplace. Career development should be fostered through advancement opportunities and training as outlined in our Educational Equity Policy. Internal mobility should be actively encouraged.

Efforts should be made to improve non-academic staff satisfaction through further engagement; they have an expertise and a knowledge of the university that should be used, where appropriate, to inform policy decisions.

We recommend that the university explore mechanisms for communication, both within the non-academic staff community itself, and between the non-academic staff and the university, that goes beyond the consultative mechanisms outlined by the Memorandum of Understanding between the university and the Queen’s University Staff Association of 1997.

Valuing non-academic staff also requires the rational, transparent distribution of staff across units, and a careful consideration of their duties. Regular review of staff roles and responsibilities should be implemented. We recommend that a transparent formula be developed to determine how university-supported staff be allocated to academic and non-academic units, and at what salary levels.

To this list we add the following:

Drawing on their experience and expertise, non-academic staff should be recognized as active participants in implementing the Academic Plan and all important Queen’s initiatives. They should be empowered to make decisions for activities that fall within their scope and knowledge.

As the University advances, it must take care to maintain necessary staff levels and skill requirements. Hiring and training plans must align with University objectives, and individual responsibilities need to be structured in a way that equips Queen’s employees for success. These plans must also convey the University’s steadfast commitment to working in partnership with non-academic staff to achieving a healthy workplace that reflects their many important contributions to the Queen’s community.

Among the long-serving and knowledgeable staff members who have helped make Queen’s what it is today, many will reach retirement age over the next 5 to 10 years. It is imperative that the University develop a formal succession planning process to manage this transition and mitigate the significant loss of institutional memory. The degree to which large-scale staffing changes can unbalance the institution should not be underestimated.

In sum, a culture shift is required at Queen’s that will see non-academic staff valued as professionals and as full partners working alongside of academic staff in achieving the University’s mission. This can be achieved by actively engaging staff in planning and

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1 In December 2010, after the writing of “Imagining the Future,” members of non-academic staff up to Grade 9 certified as a bargaining unit with the United Steel Workers. The APTF hopes that the spirit of these recommendations will guide the Collective Agreement for USW Local 2010.
implementation, by empowering them to make decisions, by instituting comprehensive two-way communication, training, and career-development support, by cultivating a healthy workplace, and by improving access to wellness services. The University should initiate annual surveys to track employee engagement and satisfaction and should modify programs based on the feedback.