

# Questioning the Narrative of Staff Bloat

IHE [insidehighered.com/blogs/technology-and-learning/questioning-narrative-staff-bloat](https://insidehighered.com/blogs/technology-and-learning/questioning-narrative-staff-bloat)

Perhaps the most powerful meme in all of higher ed is the one about [staff bloat](#).

The growth of non-faculty postsecondary staff is [blamed for everything](#) from rising higher education costs, increased student debt, and the loss of faculty autonomy.

Admittedly, my interest in this story is self-interest. As a non-faculty postsecondary professional, it appears that I'm part of the problem. Leaving aside my own dog in this fight (if that is possible), I have to wonder about this overall narrative.

If staff are so bloated, why is it that every part of higher education that I observe seems to be so understaffed?

As a [student of higher education](#), one question that I always ask folks is about staffing. The most common answer that I get is about **too much work for too few people**. Everyone tells me that they are doing jobs that really should be done by two people.

Higher ed staff seem to work all the time. They work at night. They work on weekends. They work on vacations. The reason that they work so much is that the work needs to get done, and there are not enough people to do it.

Granted, I hear the same thing from faculty. **Professors also work all the time**. This is not an either / or comparison.

If I had to make a judgment on the postsecondary workforce, I'd say that our problem **is not too many employees, but too few**. Productivity and quality are bound to suffer if everyone is stretched thin.

Perhaps my understanding of the the postsecondary employee situation is limited by the staff that I work with. Mostly, I work with professionals who are are integral to the teaching (and sometimes scholarship) operations of higher ed.

The staff that I see are instructional designers and educational technologists and media educators and developers and assessment experts. *And we don't have enough of these folks.*

As a parent of two kids in college, I hope that the schools that they attend are investing in student affairs professionals.

So I have to ask. Where do all these bloated staff work? What divisions, departments, and units across higher education are overstaffed?

If our goal is to move investments up the educational value chain - towards teaching and learning and research - where should we be looking to cut?

My sense is that everyone in any organization thinks that their job is essential for the smooth running and sustainability of the institution. The waste and inefficiencies are never in our own groups or areas or domains of responsibility. They are someplace else at the school.

My challenge is that I just don't see the waste. I don't see deadwood or featherbedding or make-work. All the people that I see who work in higher education seem to be mission driven, choosing this life out of a belief in the transformative power of higher education. They may not be faculty, but they are dedicated and loyal to their institutions, and are working incredibly hard to serve those who depend on them.

There is little doubt that the economic climate of higher education will only become more challenging. Demographic trends in many areas are not looking good, particularly in area of the Northeast and Midwest that have large numbers of small and tuition dependent schools. I doubt that technology will end up being any sort of cure for the postsecondary cost disease, as the treatment (scaled education) carries the risk of destroying much of what we value most about higher education. State funding will likely continue to decrease, as an aging population and our dysfunctional politics drive ever increasing healthcare costs.

In short, there will be more and more pressure to find savings by eliminating people from higher education. This attrition - through layoffs or not replacing open positions - will put increasing stress on those that are left behind.

We need to find a different way of talking about higher ed staff. A language that see this group (my group) as assets, not costs.

We need to get out of zero-sum thinking when it comes to postsecondary headcount, and realize that staff should increase the resources, autonomy, and opportunities for our faculty colleagues.

We need to understand that the real enemy of faculty is not staff, **but the failure to invest adequately in faculty.** The adjunctification of the faculty labor force is bad for students, and ultimately, bad for schools. Failure to invest in faculty means a race to the bottom in quality. Turn education into a commodity, and watch the value of what your school offers disappear.

Staff and faculty should be allies in the fight to invest postsecondary resources in people. We should be working together around public funding, while fighting trends to outsource work or reduce positions to temporary or part-time.

Do we have any models of faculty and staff solidarity?

Are there any faculty who are arguing against the conventional wisdom of staff bloat?

Are you feeling stretched thin by your higher ed job?