

UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON TACOMA
STAFF ASSOCIATION

Return to Campus: Staff Survey Results

UW Tacoma Staff Association
September 29, 2021

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INTRODUCTION

After 18-months of learning and working in a primarily remote fashion due to the global Covid-19 pandemic, the University of Washington has returned to being an in-person campus. University leadership hosted multiple town halls, Q & A sessions, and sent several emails to the UW community throughout this time, but direct feedback from UW staff has not been solicited by leadership.

The UW Tacoma Staff Association Executive Board is an elected body that is, among other things, tasked with advocating on behalf of campus staff with the goal of improving the overall work experience. It is in this role that we, as the Executive Board, decided to survey professional, classified, and library staff about their thoughts in regard to returning to campus in the fall. We made this decision based on informal feedback we received from different staff members after the decision to return to an in-person format was announced. A number of staff told us they felt the university didn't seek staff input when making plans for returning to campus on September 13th and, we felt it necessary to create and distribute a survey to UW Tacoma staff and allow them an opportunity to share any feedback they had about returning to an in-person model.

PURPOSE

The Executive Board created and distributed an anonymous survey for UW Tacoma staff to better understand the thoughts, concerns, and needs of classified, professional, and library staff at UW Tacoma as we return to in-person learning and work after 18 months of dealing with a global pandemic and social unrest. We specifically wanted to know what staff thought about returning to campus, and any concerns they may have about our return. The response we received is larger than any previous survey sent out by the Staff Association. Staff at UW Tacoma are a diverse group of individuals, each with their own unique backgrounds and lived experiences; the responses we received reflect this diversity. We have tried to provide an accurate representation of the range of feelings regarding issues related to the pandemic as well as issues related to individuals and their positions at UW Tacoma.

METHODOLOGY

Sample and distribution

A total of 182 staff responded to the survey between August 23, 2021, and September 7, 2021. The Executive Board promoted the survey through the staff email distribution list, the Staff Association Microsoft Teams' Channel as well as the Staff Association Instagram page. We conducted the survey using Qualtrics. Available data indicates there are around

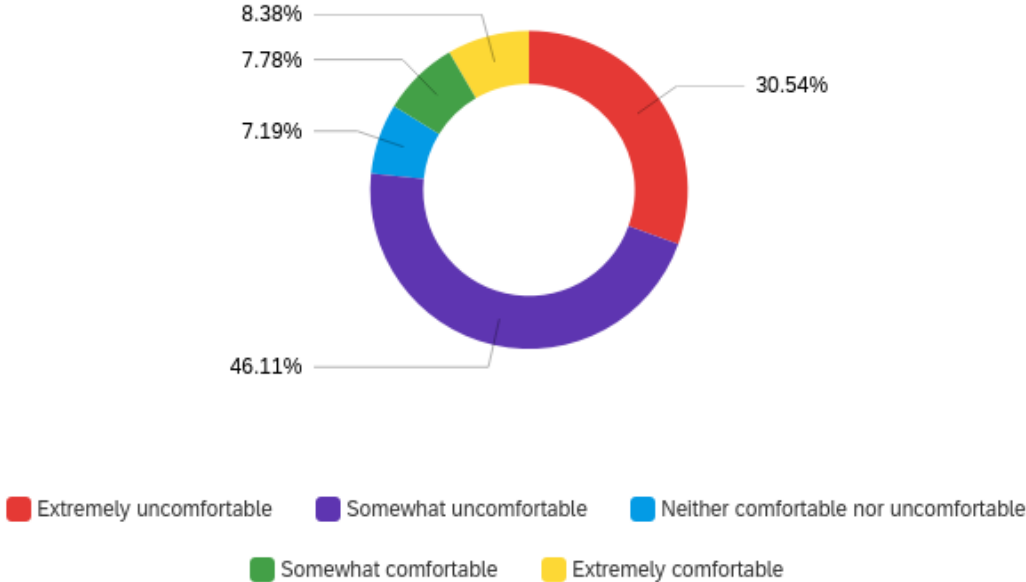
390 staff members at UW Tacoma. A total of 182 staff members responded in some part to this survey. The number of respondents does not constitute a majority of UW Tacoma staff, but members of the Executive Board believe the survey sample is large enough to provide leadership with valuable insight that can be used to alleviate staff questions and concerns, as well as inform leadership on ways to better implement future changes at UW Tacoma.

The survey consisted of 15 questions that were a mix of Likert-scale responses, single-or-multiple choice, and open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide detailed feedback. The survey was both confidential and anonymous. Questions were optional and the total number of respondents varies from question to question. The Executive Board felt the decision to format the survey this way was necessary to encourage staff to answer questions according to their level of comfort. The Executive Board met to discuss the findings as well as establish a protocol for how to report findings.

SURVEY RESULTS

STAFF LEVEL OF COMFORT WITH THE RETURN TO CAMPUS PLAN

Of the 167 respondents, 77% indicated they are either extremely uncomfortable or somewhat uncomfortable with the idea of returning to campus.



OPEN-ENDED STAFF CONCERNS ABOUT RETURNING TO CAMPUS

COVID-19 Transmission

Those who provided open-ended responses about their concerns about returning to in-person learning and student services spoke directly and strongly about the rising numbers of Covid-19 cases in Pierce and King counties, our region's dwindling ICU resources, along with variants and rising pediatric case counts, as issues that the university has not adequately addressed in the return to campus plans. The Executive Board recognizes campus leadership hosted two listening sessions to provide staff with information regarding returning to campus and attempted to assuage concerns and fears, and we appreciate these efforts, but the responses we received indicate that staff felt like they were being talked at instead of being listened to. As such, many concerns and fears remain.

Covid-19 Variants

Of the 140 open-ended responses about return to campus concerns, 19% mentioned the Delta variant, and its negative impact on case counts and the increase in positive cases, for both vaccinated and unvaccinated individuals. Concern about contracting the virus as a result of the higher rate of transmission with the Delta variant, as well as contracting the virus and exposing either children or those who are considered high risk were mentioned repeatedly.

Campus Operational Concerns

Most responses included comments regarding questions of policy, including mask and vaccine mandates. Staff showed concern over how these policies will be enforced and who would be responsible for enforcing them. Survey responses regarding vaccine mandates were not universal. A few staff questioned the idea of mandating vaccines, but more staff expressed concerns about unknowingly interacting with an unvaccinated individual while on campus and becoming infected and/or transmitting the virus to family, friends, or other high-risk individuals. The lack of social distancing on campus was a dominant theme among almost all open-ended responses, along with confusion of why partial remote work/instruction was not being implemented to limit potential campus outbreaks. As stated by one respondent, "In my job, I work in close physical with students, less than 3 feet, both of us looking at the same computer (screen side by side) for extended periods--30 to 60 minutes at a time and I don't feel this has been considered as a potential danger to my health or the health of my family."

In addition, several respondents indicated concerns about air-quality and HVAC systems' capabilities of properly filtering air. The Carlton Center was mentioned a few times

throughout the survey responses. One respondent said, "The air filtration in the Carlton Building does not meet CDC guidelines. The CDC requires a MERV 13 filter be used to protect from COVID19. However, the Carlton only is capable of using a lower MERV filter. How can we be expected to return to a building that is not compliant with CDC guidelines on air filtration. Especially when we not only have shared spaces, but also a shared building with other non-UW tenants who are not required to be vaccinated?"

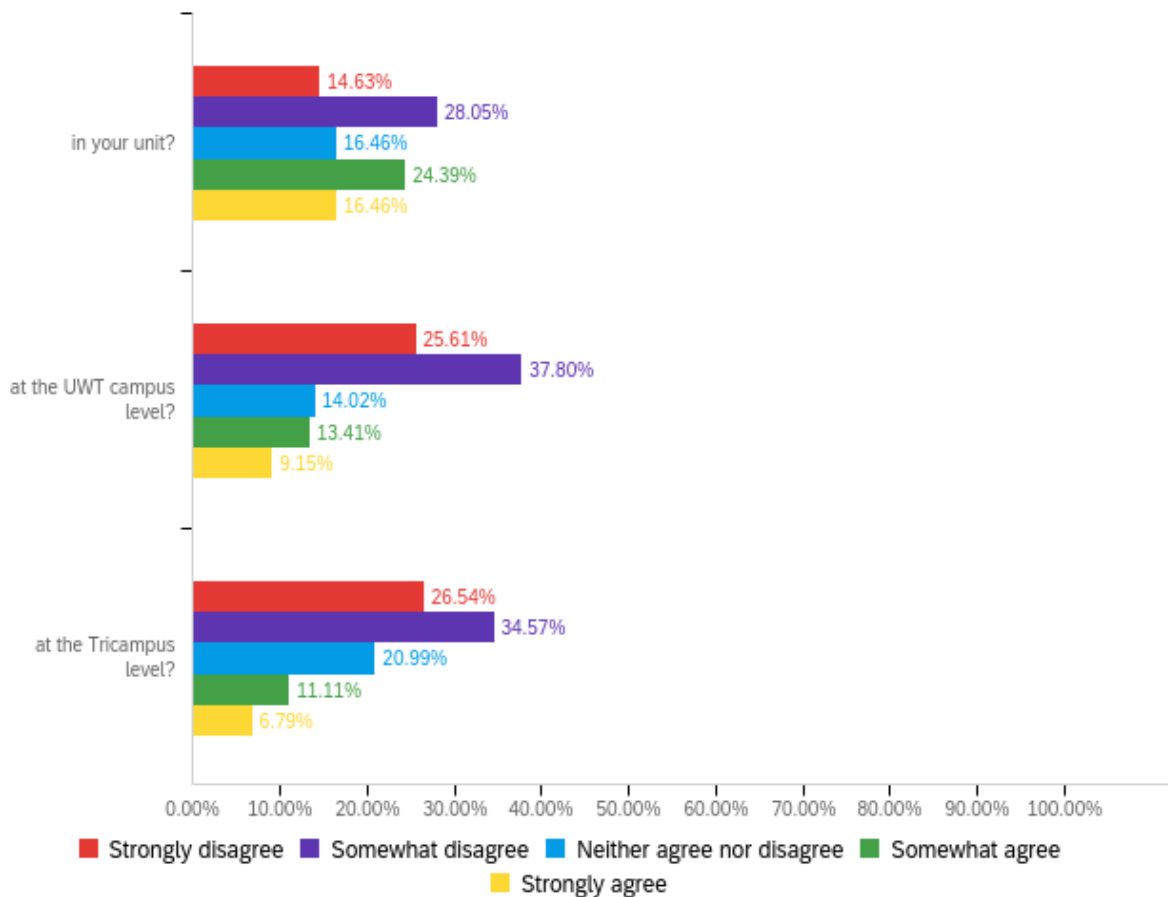
UW Policy & Leadership Concerns

Central to a number of the comments we received on issues related to the pandemic is a sense of confusion around clear policies and being left out of the decision-making process. One respondent stated, "Lack of concrete policies and procedures in place when a breakout happens. Many individuals are unvaccinated and there is not enough safety policies and procedures to protect people regardless if they are vaccinated or not with the rising of Delta variant."

A common theme was the return to in-person learning/work was driven by financial needs and considerations for people's mental and physical health were less important than the university's need to generate revenue. One respondent said they were concerned for, "The physical and mental safety of everyone who will be forced to return to campus or have their livelihoods and futures potentially jeopardized, this is a rock vs. hard place situation." Another respondent stated, "The delta variant is way more communicable and is resistant to vaccination, we should not be going face to face on campus. The numbers are way worse than last year, there is no defensible reason for doing this. People are going to get sick, be permanently disabled and die, and it's all for administrators to make some money."

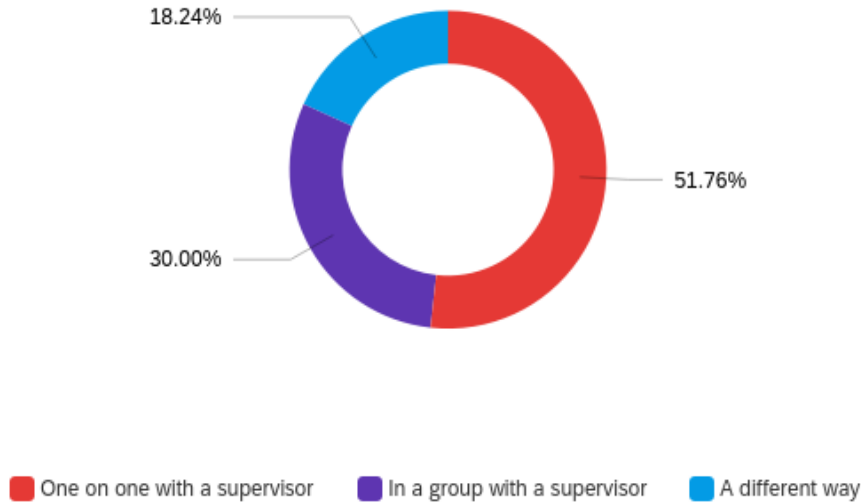
RETURN TO CAMPUS PLANS

The majority of respondents did not agree with the larger campus and tri-campus plans for returning but were split about whether they agree with their unit's plans for returning to campus. One respondent said, "My main concern is that we do not have enough private offices in our suite for all staff so some staff will be required to mask for long periods of time. We are doing our best to leverage our hybrid work agreements and sharing spaces so that the fewest # of staff will need to mask for long periods of time." Another respondent offered a different perspective, "As a supervisor, I am expected to be compliant with the UW decisions even if I disagree with them. I also disagree with moving the discretion for telework away from direct supervisors. Supervisors will know best how to ensure coverage of duties within their units and should not be required to have Vice Chancellor approvals."



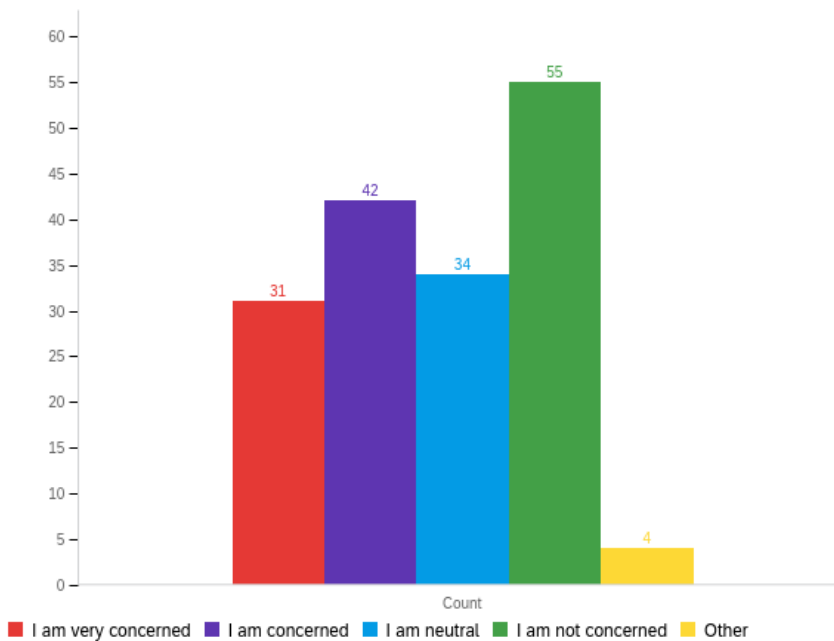
RETURN TO CAMPUS REQUESTS

A majority of respondents said their return to campus request (or Telework Agreement Plan) was handled one-on-one with a supervisor. But a concerning percentage of respondents (30%) said their request was handled in a group setting with a supervisor. The Executive Board believes these requests are deeply personal and is concerned about the impact of having staff be asked to discuss their plans in front of a group. The Executive Board worries this kind of situation is open to peer pressure and could potentially fuel resentment within a unit or among staff. Some comments also described the frustration over the unequal application of remote work plans.



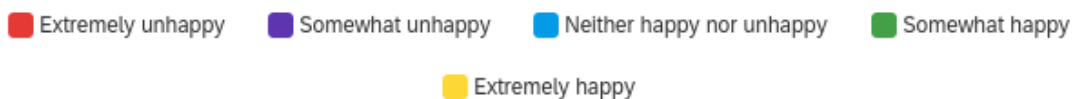
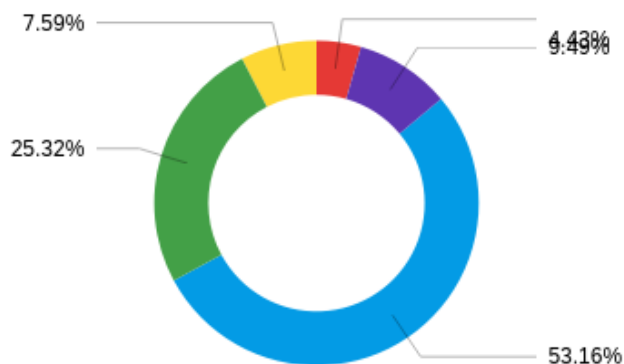
FEAR OF RETALIATION

When asked if they had fears of retaliation for voicing their concerns about the return to campus plans, 43% of respondents indicated they were either “very concerned” or “concerned” about retaliation. This is a startling finding and one that should be taken seriously by campus and university leadership. The Executive Board is uneasy about the number of respondents who indicated they’re concerned about retaliation if they were to share their concerns about returning to campus and intend to offer support to staff who have concerns but are uncomfortable sharing them individually.



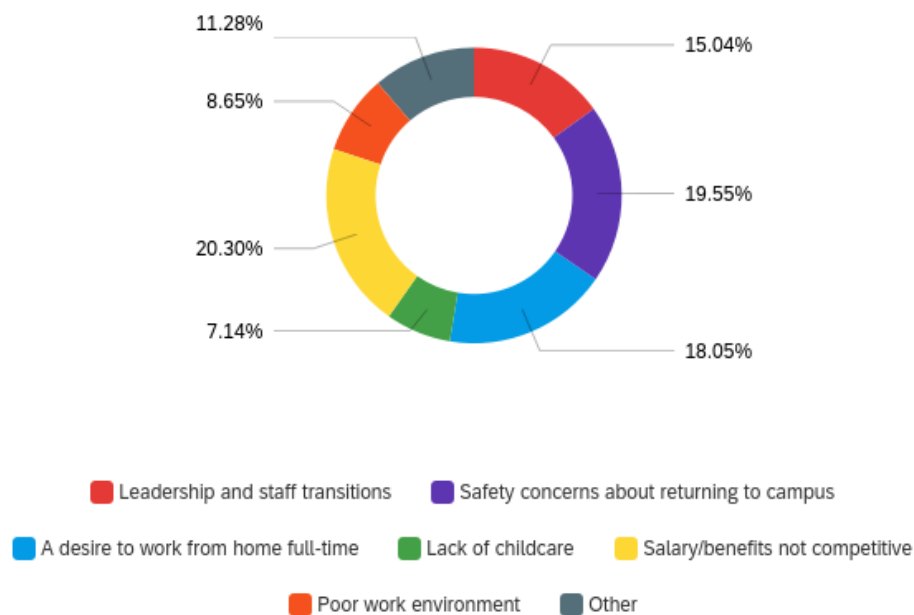
LEADERSHIP CHANGES ON CAMPUS

Given the significant changes in leadership at the UW Tacoma campus and the impacts turnover can have on staff morale, we inquired about staff's feelings on the recent changes. Just over 53% of staff were neither happy nor unhappy about the changes, but 33% were either somewhat happy or extremely happy about campus leadership changes. Only 14% were either somewhat unhappy or extremely unhappy about campus leadership changes.



STAFF PLANNING TO LEAVE THE UNIVERSITY

We asked survey respondents if they are considering leaving the university and, if so, why. Several respondents said they had no plans to leave UW Tacoma. However, many more indicated they are thinking of going elsewhere. We asked respondents to identify why they're considering leaving. The top three reasons identified were salary/benefits (20%), safety concerns about returning to campus (20%), and a desire to work from home full-time (18%).



SURVEY LIMITATIONS

The Executive Board recognizes the survey has some important data missing. We did not ask if staff their individual telework plans were approved. Question 12 should have broken down the “parent” option into different age categories to provide an extra level of detail as the parent of a child aged 11 and under may have different concerns than those whose child is older and who can be vaccinated. We also acknowledge that staff in Campus Safety & Security, Integrated Facilities Management and others who have remained on campus felt the survey didn’t adequately speak to their experiences. The Executive Board appreciates this feedback and plans to conduct a follow-up survey to address these concerns. Finally, the Executive Board understands that some of the concerns raised by respondents have been addressed by the university—vaccine mandates, philosophical exemptions—but we decided to include them in the report because they capture a moment in time and because we feel that we should not censor staff responses.

DISCUSSION

The Staff Association Executive Board respects campus and university leadership and acknowledges that this has been a challenging time for all. Our intention is to ensure campus leadership is equipped with the information needed to make decisions that prioritize the safety and well-being of the campus community.

Based on the survey results, the Executive Board feels campus leadership needs to do more to address the needs and concerns of staff at UW Tacoma. Specifically, this calls for a rethinking of how telework plans are considered and approved. We understand that some units are more student-facing than others. Even still, we are in a pandemic, specifically a wave that has resulted in hospitalizations and infections not seen since the early days of this crisis. We believe UW Tacoma staff have shown they can work remotely and do their jobs just as well from home. Forgotten in the push to return to campus, is the need to understand each person's tolerance for perceived risk. Quite simply, some are more comfortable than others with the idea of working on campus. Policy needs to match this reality.

The university as a whole embraced flexibility for an 18-month period that began in mid-March of 2020 and ended in mid-September of 2021. The Executive Board believes the flexibility the university embraced at the pandemic's outset should be continued. We acknowledge that the university has mandates in place for vaccines and masks. This is a good start. However, we can further reduce the risk of spread by minimizing the number of interactions staff have with students, faculty and other staff. This can be achieved by allowing staff to work remotely more often. In addition, in order to provide additional protection for staff, we ask that offices across campus consider an appointment only approach, this can limit the number of people in an office at a given time and would ultimately increase safety for all. Furthermore, the Executive Board believes the university does not fully understand the ways in which staff's lives have changed during those 18 months of fully remote work. The pandemic has shown us that work doesn't have to mean coming into an office every day. Indeed, the nature of work is changing. Workers see that there are other options, options that give them greater freedom and autonomy.

The Executive Board calls on university leadership to develop clear procedures around what to do when there is a COVID-19 positive case, or when someone has been exposed to COVID-19. Each unit/department should have a clear action plan in place and all their staff should be made aware of the plan. University leadership should also develop clear and consistent guidelines regarding how staff can do their jobs safely in-person. We acknowledge that some measures have been put in place. Plexi shields have been installed in reception areas and signage has gone up on campus regarding masks and vaccinations. However, there are multiple shared office spaces on campus that do not have plexi shields installed, this despite the fact that staff in these offices see students on a regular basis. Also, some of these spaces don't have a designated break room where staff can close the door to either take off their mask or to eat their lunch. This situation needs to be rectified and not just for the safety of staff, but for the well-being of students and faculty. Finally, multiple staff said they were concerned that they might be in close contact with someone who is exempted from getting vaccinated. We understand there

are privacy issues at play that limits what can be disclosed. However, some middle ground needs to be reached. One way to reduce this risk is by giving staff the option to host more remote meetings with students, faculty and other staff, depending on their own comfort level and fears.

We also want to acknowledge that there is a clear disconnect between UW policy around the safety of campus buildings and the Carlton Center. We ask university leadership to take Carlton Center concerns seriously and acknowledge the problem with the HVAC system. If the issues identified cannot be resolved, staff should have the option to work from home until adequate solutions, under state and UW standards, are provided.

The Executive Board believes the return to in-person work has created inequities among staff and that policy has produced scenarios that are impractical. For example, staff returned to campus only to have meetings over Zoom, often with other members of the campus community who were in rooms or buildings nearby. Also, hybrid work agreements created a situation where staff must pay full price for a parking permit they don't use every day. The alternative calls for staff to rely on metered parking which means having to move one's vehicle every few hours to avoid getting a ticket. The Executive Board questions the wisdom and fairness of asking staff to either foot the bill for something they don't fully utilize or to potentially devote break time to moving their vehicle.

Our survey focused on the pandemic and how staff felt about returning to work. We also dedicated time to finding out how staff felt about their work life at UW Tacoma. Perhaps the most worrisome finding is that many staff fear they'll be retaliated against for speaking their minds. We want the university to create a culture of empowerment and we would like to see language in campus messaging that encourages employees to speak up. We ask the university to invest in campus-wide training for all managers. Specifically, all managers should be required to attend conflict resolution trainings, so they learn how to recognize retaliation and prevent it. Managers need to learn how to handle complaints appropriately and accommodate requests, so all staff feel comfortable speaking up. We call on the UW Tacoma Chancellor to task each school Dean, Director and Vice Chancellor to investigate this matter in each of their unit/department within the next six months and to share its findings in a manner that all UW Tacoma staff can access.

Furthermore, staff need to be involved in this decision-making process and given the opportunity to voice their concerns without having to worry about losing their job if they say something. Higher education is a place of deep thought and innovation. It's a mistake to believe that this only comes from faculty. Staff are an integral part of campus life, and our input should be considered, and our suggestions implemented, when appropriate.

The stereotype of higher education is that of an ivory tower. UW Tacoma generally avoids this stereotype and yet the current perception among staff appears to be that campus leadership is paternalistic and mission focused to extent that it doesn't care about the needs of people, namely staff. Trust needs to be rebuilt (or maybe built in some cases) and that can only start by giving staff a seat at the table, specifically those who are not in leadership positions.

Finally, the Executive Board calls attention to the report issued by the Climate Survey Staff Implementation team. The report cites several areas of opportunity for improving the staff experience at UW Tacoma. We specifically endorse the suggestions related to staff growth and compensation. We support reclassification of staff as well as removing barriers to advancement and auditing individual units with the aim of identifying and addressing equity issue.