Western’s executive leadership has invited WWU staff leaders to participate in a conversation with the Board of Trustees. As we reflect on the pandemic, the Trustees would like to hear from the PSO, PSE, and WFSE leadership about how their membership is doing, how to better engage with their constituents, and where the campus should focus in supporting its staff. WWU staff leaders plan to highlight three areas for discussion: compensation, employee morale, and imagining the future of work post pandemic.

Participants are:

- Anna Blick, President, Professional Staff Organization (PSO)
- Cheryl Mathison, President, Public School Employees (PSE) Classified Staff Union
- Brandon Taylor, President, Washington Federation of State Employees (WFSE) Classified Staff Union
Conversation with Staff Leaders

December 2021 Board of Trustees

Presented by
Anna Blick
President of WWU Professional Staff Organization

Cheryl Mathison
President of Public School Employees of Washington, WWU Chapter

Brandon Taylor
President of Washington Federation of State Employees, WWU Chapter

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Compensation

Professional staff were asked to forego an across-the-board increase of 3% in 2020. On October 1, 2020 PSE and WWU had not come to an agreement for the 2021–2023 contract. We began mediation soon after that and after a lengthy period of time without coming to the mediation table an agreement was reached in September 2021. WFSE’s hand was forced by their parent union to ratify a contract with no pay raises for the 2021–2023 contract cycle by the October 1, 2020 contract deadline.

Meanwhile, the cost of living rose significantly. Piecemeal compensation increases of small percentages across the board have failed to address a burgeoning gap between cost of living and WWU’s stagnant wages.

Current Average Salaries, Selected Payroll Titles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Admin Services Manager A</th>
<th>PSE</th>
<th>$58,171</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Academic Support Coordinator</td>
<td>PSO</td>
<td>$52,344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Financial Aid Counselor</td>
<td>PSO</td>
<td>$47,153</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Custodian *</td>
<td>WFSE</td>
<td>$37,205</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Office Assistant</td>
<td>WFSE</td>
<td>$37,906</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program Coordinator</td>
<td>WFSE</td>
<td>$49,548</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Classroom Support Tech</td>
<td>PSE</td>
<td>$58,689</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*start out at same salary as Student Custodian Assistant, but students are paid hourly, so full-time employee can make less in a month than students since they are paid a set amount bi-monthly.

Rent

Median cost of 1 bedroom rental in Bellingham (2021): $1,100-1,2001
Median cost of 2 bedroom rental in Bellingham (2021): $1,300-1,5602

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salary Ranges</th>
<th>2020 Salary Range at Step A</th>
<th>Salary Range</th>
<th>2020 Salary</th>
<th>1bd Rent as % of Salary</th>
<th>2bd Rent as % of Salary</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42 and under</td>
<td>≤ $39,528</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>$34,368.00</td>
<td>42.35%</td>
<td>54.47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>43–52</td>
<td>$40,440–$50,256</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>$43,392.00</td>
<td>33.55%</td>
<td>43.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>53–62</td>
<td>$51,432–$64,332</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>$55,524.00</td>
<td>26.22%</td>
<td>33.72%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>63 and up</td>
<td>≥ $65,928</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>$65,928.00</td>
<td>22.08%</td>
<td>28.39%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 254 classified job classifications at WWU, 46.5% (118) of them do not initially make enough to have the median rent in Bellingham be considered affordable (⅓ of income). Currently the lowest range Step A that can afford the average 1-bedroom rental in Bellingham is 46 (as well as all IT ranges). For a 2-bedroom rental, the minimum range is 56 or 02IT Step A.

1 Zumper, Fair Market Rent
2 Zumper, Fair Market Rent
Home prices

Increase in median home prices in Whatcom County
Median home price in Whatcom County in 2021: $545,000
Bellingham (up 17% from 2020): 582,000
Ferndale (up 19% from 2020): 559,500
Lynden (up 26% from 2020): 520,000

Increase in median home prices in Skagit County
Median home price in Skagit County in 2021: $526,000
Mount Vernon (up 32.2% from 2020): 575,000
Sedro-Woolley (up 7.9% from 2020): 421,000
Stanwood (up 27% from 2020): 590,000

Increases in other cost of living expenses

Consumer Price Index rose an overall 6.2 percent this year (as of 11/10/21)
Childcare prices for daycare centers in Washington State rose 55% during the COVID-19 pandemic; prices for independent childcare rose by 83% during the same period. Whatcom County is also currently identified as a childcare desert.

Employee Morale

Workload capacity concerns

Staff regularly share a similar tale: Asking to do more with less on a long-term basis. Many staff express positions cut during mitigation efforts during the Great Recession were never replaced. The pandemic and its associated added workload and stress, including additional novel tasks and labors specific to COVID response, further exacerbated this problem. WWU experienced attrition of staff during a hiring freeze.

In the period ranging from 7/1/2020 to 6/30/2021, there were 97 departures of permanent classified and professional staff, and only 24 new hires.

The focus tends to be on the students, faculty, and exempt staff. The message seems to be that it’s okay to overwork and underpay classified staff as long as the students and faculty are happy.

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3 Redfin.com
4 Redfin.com
7 www.bellinghamherald.com%2Fnews%2Flocal%2Farticle238425618.html&usg=A0vVaw3EYu_FZRWpI3277GnzwWGF8
8 Data courtesy of WWU HR, WWU Budget Office November 2021
There is no equity when comparing classified employees to other employees on campus. We are second rate employees. It feels there is no respect for our rights. We are held to a completely different standard and then treated very differently.

**Pervasive sense that we are an afterthought**

When we were asked to report to the Board of Trustees on how staff are experiencing the campus, we turned to our respective memberships to ask and listen. The pervasive sense among staff of all groups is that we are an afterthought. Here are some main reasons why:

- We have a low-recognition environment for staff. There are only a few times a year excellence is celebrated. This should be regular, as it is for faculty service and contribution.
- Lack of succession planning, no career ladder programs. Employees take pay cuts to move laterally between divisions for additional experience.
- DCA (Dual Career Assistance) was built for faculty. Staff do not benefit from an equivalent structure.
- HR lacks adequate resources for organizational/professional development, onboarding, and training. Staff are often asked to volunteer their time to fill these gaps.

**What does it mean to serve the university community?**

Staff service on committees and in university governance is not compensated, yet the University benefits from our labors. Faculty receive incentives, such as course releases, to serve in these roles, and we do not. This impacts who is even able to participate. And yet, despite this, we are consistently asked to volunteer additional time for university projects, initiatives, and governance in the name of service (this BOT meeting is but an example).

**Strong desire for remote and flexible work**

Looking towards the future, remote work should be a part of WWU’s plan for moving forward. Many people are able to complete all of their job tasks completely and maintain required support for departments and students. It would be a huge mistake if WWU makes the decision to require all staff to be back in the office all the time. Not only are people able to do their jobs, but for many, their quality of life is improved by working remotely.

I am sure I am not the only one who has expressed concerns regarding access to remote work during Winter Quarter. As I understand it, it was a luxury of Fall quarter and will not be offered in subsequent Quarters with the exception of health-related accommodations. Why?? Has COVID taught us nothing about the potential flexibility of the workplace? Many organizations have moved to a 32-hour work week which has shown benefits to productivity, economics, and climate change. Additionally, the 32-hour work week is a feminist issue, supporting families and caregivers as they are often faced with the "second shift" as they come home from work exhausted,
but yet expected to tend to the home (cooking dinner, preparing meals, cleaning, housework, etc). Also, as we all know, Whatcom county is a childcare desert. Access to fewer hours at my desk would help me and many other employees at Western ensure coverage. Why is the college insistent on "the way it’s always been done", which has never been a good reason to do anything.

While Western makes a big show of valuing equity and allowing remote work for some employees, it’s clear that while faculty are being given the option to teach online, classified staff are being held to a higher standard, with some being forced to work on campus regardless of safety or precautions. Staff are not being notified of positive COVID tests, though faculty and Chairs are. We aren’t taking the opportunity to examine the work before throwing people back into the front lines of customer service.

Governor Inslee issued a proclamation about climate change, asking all state institutions to examine their practices to see if we can impact the amount of emissions used. Do we need to be onsite and commute five days a week? What does our job actually require of us? We’re all being pushed to go back to a normal that may not have been healthy for many in the first place.

Lack of equity and frustration with lip service

Bargaining Agreement

During the bargaining process, PSE asked that the following statement be added to the Preamble of the contract:

The first paragraph of the Preamble states:
This Agreement is made and entered into by Western Washington University (Western), referred to as the “Employer” and Public School Employees of Washington (PSE), referred to as “PSE”. The parties agree that it has been and will continue to be in their mutual interest:
- To support the intent of Western Washington University’s Strategic plan by fostering a caring community where all members are supported, where everyone has a voice and the ability to be heard, and where the definition of community is broad and inclusive in an environment that pursues justice and equity in its policies and practices and impacts;

We were told absolutely not, that the strategic plan changes and that the University did not want to make it part of the contract.

Lack of an agreed upon definition of equity

PSE has also tried to introduce the topic of an agreed-upon definition of equity with the university. We were told that the university is looking into it.
Employee Voices

It is hard to support students when you are not provided the adequate resources to do so. Western’s words do not correlate with its actions. WWU talks about the importance of equity and inclusion yet they turn around and treat certain populations inequitably and discriminate against certain groups.

I feel that I am regarded as a tool required to achieve certain bureaucratic aims, and not necessarily as someone with valuable experience and perspective. I would like to contribute more to the student experience and feel that my skills—while few—are not being fully utilized. Not receiving the same benefits as some of my colleagues makes me feel like a second-tier employee; this practice is not aligned with Western’s commitment to equity and fairness.

"Commitment to equity and justice, and respect for the rights and dignity of others" does not apply to classified employees.

It is ironic that equality is espoused on campus, but classified staff are not treated equally. Classified staff do not have the same vacation time (3+ weeks less) or retirement benefits as faculty or professional staff.

Staff are the servant class of WWU. Much time is wasted by admin in formulating feel good statements that never seem to address real world problems. Staff are retaliated against for bringing up problems.

We are included to be included, but not listened to or part of the process. They go in with a plan and stick to it. They will not listen or willing to accept any ideas or input. All smoke and mirrors of being part of the processes.

If Equity and work life balance are important, then put your money where your mouth is. Otherwise, take down the mission and vision statements and stop pretending to be something you’re not.

PSE Survey Results (2018, 2020)

This data comes from the last two PSE bargaining surveys:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Do you believe the Mission and Vision of WWU is applied to classified employees?</th>
<th>2018 (84 Responses)</th>
<th>2020 (195 Responses)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Occasionally</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>42%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rarely</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I believe that Western Washington University’s President and Board of Trustees has a strong commitment to the overall wellbeing of classified employees. | 2018 | 2020  
--- | --- | ---  
Agree/Strongly Agree | 36% | 40%  
Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 39% | 40%  
Neither Agree or Disagree | 25% | 20%  

I believe that Western’s Administration, excluding the President and Board of Trustees has a strong commitment to the overall well-being of classified employees. (VPs, Provost, etc...) | 2018 | 2020  
--- | --- | ---  
Agree/Strongly Agree | 26% | 30%  
Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 49% | 52%  
Neither Agree or Disagree | 25% | 18%  

WWU Human Resources has a strong commitment to the overall wellbeing of classified employees | 2018 | 2020  
--- | --- | ---  
Agree/Strongly Agree | 16% | 27%  
Disagree/Strongly Disagree | 66% | 59%  
Neither Agree or Disagree | 18% | 15%  

Looking Toward the Future

We find ourselves working for a university two years after the start of a global pandemic. Reflecting on lessons learned, looking toward a meaningful COVID-19 recovery, and with the WWU Strategic Plan\(^9\) in the background, we ask the Board of Trustees to consider our following recommendations:

- Extend to staff what is extended to faculty. Acknowledge the direct and critical roles staff play in the recruitment, enrollment, retention, advising, support, instruction, and wellbeing of our students (Goals #1, #3, & #4)
- Provide staff with an equal voice in the strategic budget process (UPRC is a subcommittee of Faculty Senate and provides us with only nominal representation). (Goal #4)
- Recognize the health and safety risks undertaken by those working on site. Proactively tackle burnout. (Goals #2, #3, & #4)

● Meaningfully assess lessons learned during the work-from-home mandate, and support efforts to implement long-term changes. (Goal #4)

● Offer comprehensive benefits, such as improved on-site childcare and tuition discounts/waivers for dependents. (Goals #2, #3, and #4)

● Recognize that compensation issues will only become more dire, given current economic trends. Make concrete steps to phase in an appropriate compensation program to support our espoused goals of transformational education, diversity, and academic excellence. (Goals #1, #3, & #4)

● Be bold, be strategic (Make Waves!). Too often administration takes a “wait and see” approach to staff benefits and compensation, relying upon the state or other public four-years to set the agenda. Ask what is right for the employees of WWU and pursue those objectives. Involve staff governance leaders directly in the conversation with legislators (and, thank you for inviting us here today). (Goals #1, #2, #3, & #4)