

TO: President Gretchen Mullin-Sawicki, Faculty and Staff

FROM: Ann S. Chapman, Employment, Policy & Higher Education Consultant

DATE: April 22, 2021

RE: Report on NHTI Work Climate Assessment

A. Introduction

In early March, 2021, the College asked me to conduct a work climate assessment among faculty and staff.¹ This request arose out of a College Council² meeting on February 19, 2021 where some faculty members alleged that faculty have felt “intimidated” or “bullied”³ because of votes they made in College Council meetings. Because no specific individuals or incidents were identified in that meeting or afterwards, it was decided to conduct a climate assessment to “take the pulse” of faculty and staff, and to see whether any specific allegations of conduct that could constitute any type of workplace misconduct under College policies was revealed.

This report summarizes the broad themes that emerged from the climate assessment and some suggestions for possible next steps.

B. Climate Assessment Process

It is important to note that this was a qualitative rather than a quantitative assessment, and it did not involve every faculty and staff member at the College. Rather, the members of the College Council (where the allegations arose) were invited to participate in interviews with me, as were other individuals who had raised concerns with the President about what happened at the February 19, 2021 College Council meeting. During the course of these interviews, individuals were asked if they knew of others who might want to provide input for the climate assessment, and they were encouraged to ask those other individuals to contact me for an interview. As a result, many additional faculty and staff members contacted me and were interviewed.

In all, I conducted interviews with 49 individuals via Zoom, and two additional individuals submitted emails to me in lieu of a meeting. The interviews took place between March 14 and April 11, 2021. Some faculty members were accompanied by a union representative during their interview, with whom I also consulted during the assessment process. The 49 individuals I met with included:

- 32 faculty members (including a small number of departed/retired and adjunct faculty).
- 16 staff members (who hold a variety of positions across several departments/divisions).
- One student.

¹ At NHTI, “staff” includes individuals in non-faculty positions, including the President and other top leadership positions. Where a distinction between the top tier of leadership and other staff is important in this report, I have identified them separately (“staff” and “top leadership”).

² The College Council is comprised of faculty, staff and a student. The Council reviews and approves proposals from four standing committees that address curriculum, learning assessment, student policies, diversity and other important College business. Once proposals are approved by College Council, they go to the President for final approval.

³ It should be noted that individuals typically use terms such as “bullying” and “intimidation” to subjectively describe a wide variety of behaviors, which can range from an abrasive tone, to unprofessional conduct, to conduct that violates College policies and laws, and all sorts of other conduct within that range.

I reviewed voluminous materials provided by individuals, including written materials on NHTI's shared governance model, emails and other documents. I also watched the February 19, 2021 recording of the College Council meeting that led to this climate assessment, as well as the March 26 and April 2, 2021 College Council meetings (at the suggestion of several individuals who were interviewed).

C. Themes From The Climate Assessment

This section of the report distills the broad themes that emerged from the climate assessment. It is important to keep in mind that all participants were assured that their identities would be kept confidential, and there are also laws governing confidentiality of personnel information. For these reasons, specific individuals are not named and specific incidents are not described in this report.

It is hoped that members of the College community who read this report will do so with an open mind, and in the spirit of using what has been learned through the climate assessment to move forward together in a collegial and collaborative manner.

It is important to note at the outset that the climate assessment did not uncover specific acts that stood in clear violation of College policies. That having been said, the assessment revealed many opportunities for improvements in communications, College processes, and norms for interpersonal interactions which could improve the workplace environment for faculty and staff.

1. There Are Issues To Address, But There Is Good News Too

During my career, I have worked with many organizations that are struggling with morale and other issues, and looking for a path forward. From my professional experience, I have observed that the organizations most likely to overcome such difficulties have some common features. These include having a critical mass of employees who are committed to the organization's fundamental mission and values; who want the organization to succeed; and who are willing to engage in the difficult conversations needed to bring about positive change.

In the interviews, I saw a deep reservoir of pride in NHTI's history and accomplishments, and a commitment to its fundamental mission, values and students. This is no small thing, and should be recognized as a foundation on which to build a more collegial workplace.

It should also be recognized that it takes some institutional and individual courage to be willing to engage in a climate assessment by a neutral outside party in the first place – because such an assessment usually uncovers some unanticipated and/or uncomfortable truths that need to be addressed, as it did in this case. Thus, I applaud leadership, faculty and staff for engaging in this important process of reflection.

2. Rome Was Not Built In A Day, And The College Did Not Get Here In A Day

The one thing that everyone interviewed agreed upon is that morale among employees is low right now. Later in this report, I will discuss particular issues at play, but it is important to recognize that the morale issue cannot be attributed to one person or event, and outside forces also have also played a significant role in where the College is today.

It was very clear among many long-time faculty and staff that there is a sense of loss and sadness for what are seen as NHTI's "glory days" as the "pre-eminent" institution in the Community College System of New Hampshire (CCSNH). There were many references made to NHTI's number one ranking in college "value added" by the Brookings Institution in 2015.

There were also several observations from faculty who felt that a now-departed CCSNH Chancellor weakened NHTI by duplicating programs in other community colleges and by replacing very long-term leadership at NHTI, many of whom had come up through the ranks. In the past few years, there has also

been frequent turnover in the top leadership positions at NHTI. Some faculty expressed sadness or anger about what they perceive as lack of respect for and valuing of the “institutional knowledge” of long-time faculty by leadership who are relatively new to the College.

In addition to the turnover in leadership, NHTI has faced financial and operational issues resulting from rising payments to CCSNH for shared expenses, declining enrollments and other financial pressures. Both faculty and staff discussed the impact of layoffs; increased workloads due to faculty and staff not being replaced; and program and operational changes that were perceived as having a negative impact on faculty and staff. Frequently mentioned by faculty was a perception that leadership thinks that adjunct faculty can provide the same quality of student experience overall as full-time faculty.

It was evident in the interviews that there has been a cumulative emotional effect on many faculty and staff from reductions in the workforce and operational/program changes, and that many are fearful and uncertain about the future, and about the security of their positions. These emotions are understandable under the circumstances, and should be recognized and acknowledged by leadership as individuals’ lived experiences.

However, these emotions also appear to be driving a non-collegial approach to dealing with workplace issues among some faculty that contribute to the current problems with communication and trust.

3. Need for Pandemic Precautions Exacerbates Workplace Issues, But Did Not Cause Them

There is no doubt that the precautions necessary due to the COVID-19 pandemic (social distancing, remote work, Zoom meetings, etc.) have exacerbated some of the workplace issues the College is facing, and this problem is certainly not unique to NHTI. As in many other workplaces across the country, faculty and staff at NHTI expressed that they often feel isolated, and that communicating via Zoom and email is not the same as visiting a supervisor or colleague down the hall. Gaps in communication channels have led to some employees feeling out of the loop and sometimes undervalued. In addition, a reliance on email communication by some has contributed to misunderstandings and subsequent “drama” that might have been avoided by face-to-face conversations or even a telephone call. Finally, it was also frequently noted in interviews that workplace restrictions have made it more difficult for top leadership to be visible on campus and to build relationships with faculty and staff.

While some faculty and staff stated that they have good communication with and access to top leadership, there were numerous comments about lack of visibility of some leaders on campus and barriers to communication with top leadership. There was also a common perception that top leadership have not taken the time to build relationships, and to meet with faculty and staff to understand existing programs and structures before suggesting and/or implementing changes. There was a perception on the part of some faculty that leadership feels that faculty do not work hard, and does not value the significant amount of work they do outside of teaching classes. This perception is not universal by any means, but it is prevalent, particularly in some departments.

For their part, there was a perception by some leadership and staff that the efforts they are making to help NHTI survive and grow are not recognized by the faculty, and that some faculty are resistant to what leadership perceives as necessary changes to programs and operations to ensure the long-term sustainability of the College.

In a nutshell, many members of leadership, staff and faculty tend to mirror each other in feeling that they are undervalued and that their contributions are not recognized. The interviews evidenced that many individuals lack trust and have a tendency to assume ill intent by others in the workplace, sometimes without being able to provide specific evidence, or based on broad assumptions or anecdotal information.

4. The Faculty Is Not A Monolith

On the faculty side, leadership is centered with a few individuals on the College Council and Faculty Senate, who raised the allegations of “intimidation” and “bullying” at the February 19, 2021 College Council meeting. Subsequently, one of the faculty leaders delivered an unsigned letter from “Concerned NHTI Faculty” to the President.⁴ From the interviews, it was clear that some faculty have been outspoken in voicing their concerns about leadership and changes at the College over many years. It was also clear that some individuals have been personally affected by what they view as negative changes made by leadership (such as changes in their own position or department) in the past few years, and/or that they have had close colleagues who have been affected negatively by changes. These faculty members’ sincerely-held feelings and beliefs are not questioned here.

However, it was also clear from the interviews with faculty that, while the anonymous letter of concern does reflect the views of some faculty, it definitely does not reflect the views of all faculty. Some faculty who were interviewed expressed embarrassment about the anonymous letter, which they said did not reflect their perspectives or experience. Many faculty stated that they have disengaged from the Faculty Senate and from discussing issues with some fellow faculty because they find the tone of discourse to be negative and not to be inclusive of all perspectives. Several faculty expressed sympathy for leadership in having to deal with tough budget and programming issues and decisions.

5. Communication, Communication, Communication

Issues with communication at all levels (leadership to the College community; leadership to Department Chairs/supervisors; and between Department Chairs/supervisors and those they supervise) are central to many of the concerns raised by faculty and staff in the interviews. Among the common issues raised were the following:

- Faculty and staff frequently raised that the President’s primary means of communication is through her video log (vlog), but that it is not transcribed, and that the vlog does not provide enough information about important issues or should not take the place of personal interactions.
- Faculty and staff frequently stated that information from leadership is fragmented and different divisions/departments do not always receive the same information, or the information they need to effectively serve students (such as COVID response or registering for classes).
- Faculty and staff frequently raised that not all Department Chairs and supervisors effectively communicate information from leadership.
- Faculty and staff also frequently stated that they are asked to compile data without adequate reasons for why the information is needed; or without consideration or appreciation from leadership or supervisors about the burden of answering requests when reduced personnel has meant that remaining employees have increased workloads.
- Faculty and staff often commented that they feel that leadership or supervisors do not understand their programs and/or do not ask for or value faculty feedback when making decisions about their programs and positions.

⁴ This letter contains allegations “intimidation” and “retaliation,” among other concerns raised, but does not provide specific examples.

- Several faculty members expressed concerns that leadership does not engage enough with government, community and business leaders to promote the College and its programs; and does not understand the unique culture of New Hampshire. These faculty members believe that this has always been an important of leadership responsibilities in the past.
- Several faculty commented that they perceive leadership to “take the side” of students when students complain, and that leaders do not seek the faculty’s side of the story. Several faculty were concerned about a draft student complaint process which was circulated by leadership this year and which was perceived as overly complicated/ burdensome. There was also confusion about the current status of that draft.
- At the February 19, 2021 College Council meeting where the allegations of “intimidation” and “bullying” were made, staff noted that there are College procedures in place to address such allegations and urged faculty to use these procedures if they had concerns. In the interviews, several faculty expressed skepticism that these procedures are effective, based on their own experience or anecdotal experience they had heard from others. This is a significant trust and communication gap.
- As noted in #3 above, there appears to be an over-reliance on the use of email as a communication tool by some faculty and leadership, which has led to misunderstandings, misperceptions, escalation of relatively minor issues, and an elevated level of “drama” in interactions that are counterproductive to a collegial atmosphere.
- Many incidents described by leadership, faculty and staff appeared to elevate “the personal” or personality, above resolving professional, academic and program concerns.
- Several faculty stated that they felt they could not provide their personal perspectives on issues in meetings if they were contrary to the views of leadership, and that doing so sometimes led to emails from some leadership that were perceived as “scolding” or “intimidating” or “silencing,” by their description. (In reviewing emails provided to me, the perceptions were not unreasonable; the emails might have been better phrased, but did not rise, in and of themselves, to violating specific College policies).
- Several faculty members stated that the use of titles (calling those with doctorates “Dr.” and calling those without doctorates “Mr.” or “Ms.”) was both unnecessarily formal and raised unnecessary distinctions among colleagues.
- As noted in #4 above, some faculty were also unhappy that certain faculty purport to speak for “all faculty” and they perceived these faculty as “cliquey.” There was a feeling among many of the faculty raising this issue that they did not want to speak out on issues with certain faculty for fear of being targeted for their differing views.

6. Shared Governance – A Microcosm

There was general agreement that the concept of shared governance⁵ is a good one. In general, leadership tended to think the shared governance model is clear (although it was noted that the model is under review at this time and adjustments may be warranted).

Some faculty expressed concern that they did not have a say in creating the current shared governance model. Many faculty and some staff involved in shared governance felt that the roles and responsibilities,

⁵ At NHTI, shared governance is defined as “a transparent and inclusive decision-making process that includes faculty, staff and students.”

decision making authority, and lines of communication between and among various committees, the College Council and the Faculty Senate are not clear.

Recordings of College Council meetings, and individual faculty and staff reactions/perceptions of the meetings, raise (at a minimum) the following issues for the College to consider and address:

- The lack of clear bylaws and procedures for the College Council has contributed to the recent gridlock in the decision making and voting processes, and caused frustration for many faculty and staff.
- There were several concerns raised about how meetings are conducted, including impromptu interruptions, unprofessional conduct, and not adhering to agendas.
- It was reported by many individuals that there are “meetings outside of meetings” where some faculty discuss what will happen at College Council meetings. There were also several reports that some faculty members engage in private texting and calls during meetings to discuss what is going on, that all participants in the meeting are not privy to. These private conversations run the risk of being interpreted as attempts to influence Council members’ actions and what happens at the meetings.
- There were numerous concerns raised that some faculty members treat other members disrespectfully in College Council meetings (such as making faces, interrupting or “going after” individuals making presentations). There were also less frequent concerns raised about the conduct of staff at meetings.
- While some faculty support the concept of secret ballot voting at College Council meetings during their interviews, there were numerous faculty and staff who voiced that secret ballot voting was the antithesis of the transparency the College needs. These faculty members felt that addressing underlying problems if they exist that led to the request for ballot voting was a more appropriate solution.

D. Some Suggestions For Next Steps

What is clear from the interviews is that no one person or group is responsible for where the College is today. No doubt, however -- there are difficult perspectives for some to read in this report. My hope is that readers can be both self-reflective and realize that everyone in the College’s work community has played at least some small role in where things are today. The overarching purpose of the climate assessment was to figure out what factors are contributing to low morale in order to then figure out what steps are needed to build a safe and collegial workplace, where all can work together toward a shared mission and future.

To that end, I offer the following suggestions for consideration:

1. This report should be made available for review to faculty and staff, in the spirit of transparency and rebuilding trust.
2. It would be beneficial to provide structured, facilitated opportunities for faculty and staff to discuss the report in a safe and respectful environment; to practice rebuilding collegial dialogue and trust; and to re-focus on the College’s core mission and values.
3. Creation of clear bylaws for the College Council would be very beneficial to ensure a predictable and appropriately transparent process for conducting Council business.
4. It would be beneficial to provide training for faculty and staff leaders in effective meeting management.

5. My understanding is that a review of the shared governance model is underway, and that review should include the issues raised in this report. General training for faculty and staff about how the shared governance process works would be beneficial given the frequent comments from faculty that the structure is not clear.
6. It would be beneficial to re-establish clear norms and expectations for how faculty and staff interact in the workplace, to establish a collaborative, open and trusting culture in which the important issues facing the College can be discussed.
7. A systemic review of College communication channels would be helpful to see where the gaps are and what improvements can be made.
8. It would be beneficial to provide one-on-one debriefings with me for staff and faculty leadership regarding the report, to process feedback from this assessment confidentially in greater depth and to aid in understanding of the findings.
9. There should be further dialogue about how to manage complaints and concerns raised by students, faculty and staff to ensure that problems are addressed in a timely and respectful manner for all involved.
10. The faculty should consider coming together with appropriate facilitation to address issues raised in this report, and to ensure that all faculty perspectives on important issues are heard in Faculty Senate and other available forums.
11. From the interviews, I have learned that there are a number of employees who have substantial knowledge of and experience with organizational management, and/or navigating difficult conversations and organizational change. It would be beneficial to tap into these valuable internal resources as the College moves forward.
12. Finally, it would be beneficial to find appropriate ways ask employees for their ideas about how to address issues raised in this report. No doubt there are many creative and valuable opportunities to create positive change that I have not identified.

E. Conclusion

Thank you for giving me the opportunity to work with you on this important project. It will take time, patience, humility, and a great deal of listening for the College to re-build workplace morale, but having met so many of the talented, intelligent and caring individuals who work at NHTI, I have every hope that together you will be successful.

Please do hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about this report, or if I can assist you with anything else.