Could Reducing 'Sludge' Increase Faculty Morale?

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Faculty anger over low pay and high workload has been growing for years, but the one-two punch of COVID and rising inflation has brought the issue to a head. The most recent surveys confirm what many of us know anecdotally to be true: faculty are "calling it quits," as a recent *Inside Higher Ed* article described, in ever-increasing numbers. Far from over, the Great Resignation and the Great Disengagement seem to have just gotten started.

The complexities and limitations of both state and private budgets, changing public attitudes regarding the value of higher education, market competition, and a high demand for employees in the larger marketplace make providing fair compensation for faculty an intractable problem for even the most well-intentioned administrators. Likewise, ever-expanding expectations for amenities and courses along with the inherently incommensurate nature of teaching, scholarship and service make ostensibly simple attempts to reduce workload complicated—especially without funds to hire more faculty members and spread the work around.

Who knows when—or even if—these loggerheads will ever break. In the meantime, the people seeking more immediate actions to increase engagement, reduce workload and enhance stakeholders' overall well-being should consider looking internally for ways to reduce the morale-killing "sludge" that typically proliferates in institutions of higher education.

In a recent book on the subject, *Sludge: What Stops Us From Getting Things Done and What to Do About It*, Cass R. Sunstein, Harvard University law professor and chair of the technical advisory group on behavioral insights and sciences for health at the World Health Organization, explains that sludge is "understood to consist of frictions that separate people from what they want to get." It is the extra time and energy required to complete supposedly straightforward tasks—the proverbial "thousand cuts" leading to our figurative demise.

Ever had to search and search for a link on your institution's website that you think should be much, much easier to find than it is? Or waited for an interminably long time to speak with someone to report a simple problem? How about spending forever trying to locate the right

app so you can open the new type of file being used by some external department? If so, then you'll know exactly what sludge is. You'll also know just how infuriating it can be.

Sometimes sludge can be a good thing and purposely introduced into a process to slow it down. Maybe we should take a second to consider if we *really* want to delete all those files or reformat that drive. However, when unintended, sludge can have surprisingly harmful effects. More than just demotivating or morale-diminishing, "Sludge infringes on human dignity," as Sunstein says, making us feel disrespected and worthless. When I explained "sludge" to a colleague recently, she aptly characterized it as "soul crushing."

Sludge can also impede cognitive capacity, an effect that can be particularly debilitating for academics. Even the most intelligent professor has a limit to how much thinking they can do —attention is a finite resource. And when it's spent trying to navigate a convoluted financial reporting system, or figuring out which password works with which login, or crafting quarterly reports we suspect no one actually needs or reads, then less attention can be focused on research and students.

Sunstein identifies several common ways institutions have reduced sludge. Making forms shorter, electronically accessible and with recurring information prefilled can greatly diminish sludge. (I've lost count of the times I have had to look up my own institution's official address so that I can include it on a form required by that exact same institution. I should remember it by now, but I don't and probably never will.) Making information collection, meetings and other required events less frequent when possible is another. And one of the most effective sludge reducers is automatic opt-in. Voter registration, professional training, text alerts and countless other systems show a significant increase in participation— on average 26 percent, according to Sunstein—when users are automatically signed up.

While its manifestations might be different, sludge persists in any organization. Accordingly, to combat sludge, Sunstein recommends organizations conduct a "sludge audit," which includes five steps: announce, identify, prioritize, focus and reduce.

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At a college or university, a sludge audit might go something like this: the president or provost announces a "war on sludge" and assigns a person or committee to lead the effort. Deans, chairs and program directors are asked to identify three instances of sludge. Their answers are compared to determine commonalities, which can then be used to prioritize and focus on subsequent reduction efforts.

Each department and college will find their own opportunities for sludge reduction, but it wouldn't be surprising for many to report common problems and for there to be shared solutions. If one chair finds an area of sludge that can be removed, others probably will have

been slowed down by it, too, and will also welcome its removal.

Likewise, small efforts to reduce sludge can have a cumulative effect. For instance, in the writing program for which I'm the director, requisite signatures for annual evaluations usually required the lecturers to print their evaluation, scan the document and return it to me via email. This process was cumbersome by itself, but it was usually made worse by the untimely need for software or hardware updates, problems with choosing a file type that wasn't too large to email, or sometimes the need to find a scanner in the first place.

By adding a simple option for an electronic signature to the evaluation, I saved the lecturers and myself a great deal of time and energy, not to mention an immeasurable amount of potential frustration. Moreover, it encouraged me to use electronic signatures for other documents as well as share the technique with my colleagues in other departments—indirect outcomes that will further reduce sludge elsewhere.

The positive ripple effect caused by sludge reduction has the potential to extend beyond the frustrations of faculty and staff members and improve some of the larger difficulties facing higher education right now, such as student enrollment and retention. Complicated admission processes, draconian student loan applications, unnecessary tests and a host of other types of sludge certainly account for many students not enrolling in higher education or staying there once enrolled. An institution that embraces sludge reduction could experience a cultural shift that ultimately helps students as well as improves the circumstance shaping faculty members' compensation and workload issues.

Faculty are right to demand fair pay for the work they do. And even the best efforts to reduce sludge will do little to improve morale and counter faculty discontent if they continually feel they are being underpaid and overworked. Yet, conversely, faculty morale is unlikely to be significantly or instantly increased by raises or course reductions alone. After all, few of us worked so hard to become instructors and professors just for the money. In fact, as part of an ongoing strategy, sludge reduction can improve the processes underpinning modern institutions of higher education at the same time that it strikes at the root cause of our current malaise: not feeling valued.

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