

HUCTW Open Letter
to
HUCTW Members and the Harvard Community



February 5, 2010

Beyond the Layoffs: What is Harvard’s “New Normal?”

Early last year it became clear that, for the first time in decades, the University’s schools and departments would have to figure out how to cut costs. Throughout the winter and spring, many in the Harvard community waited to see what form those budget cuts would take. HUCTW leaders, staff, faculty members, and student advocates engaged with financial administrators in a spirited discussion about priorities. During that anxious period much attention was focused, on campus and in the media, on the question of layoffs—would the Harvard workforce see large-scale job losses, like those increasingly common in other sectors of the economy?

By June, we knew that there would be some staff layoffs at Harvard, creating a difficult time for our community. [Previous HUCTW communications](#) have described that experience in detail. Energetic campaigning and creative union-management discussions produced solid successes in saving jobs and minimized the number of layoffs. Advocacy through our “Work Security” program resulted in new job placements for most of the laid-off HUCTW members who sought reemployment at Harvard.

As the smoke began to clear from those layoffs in the final months of 2009, a new set of broader questions has emerged: What are the long-term effects of all the cost reductions undertaken by the Harvard schools in the past year? What are the trends and patterns in the separate schools’ strategies for coping with financial constraints? What really happened at Harvard in the budget cuts of 2009?

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This letter is an attempt to begin finding answers to those questions, based on the experiences of HUCTW members around the University. It is not a comprehensive review of all cost-saving steps taken—we will not comment here on the effects of constraints on faculty hiring or the one-year salary freeze for non-union staff. Our analysis is based on concerns and hopes expressed by union members in HUCTW meetings and conversations over the past few months.

Official communications from University leaders, issued periodically as the budget crisis unfolded, did not suggest a unified University approach to the financial difficulties. The President, Vice-Presidents and Deans wrote in generalities about the need to manage resources prudently while maintaining Harvard's high standards and ambitious agenda. The following passage, in a letter from Drew Faust last February, is fairly typical: "...our challenge is to confront the new economic realities and intelligently adapt ourselves to them, while at the same time affirming and strengthening the enterprise of learning and discovery that lies at the heart of what we do."

When cost reduction efforts were undertaken in the University's very separate schools and departments, they were not at all integrated or consistent. Some units faced more severe financial pressures than others, based on varying degrees of reliance on the endowment and other factors. At the same time, there were some commonalities and trends that cut across the decentralized units.

In the most general terms, there were three types of cost-reduction strategies affecting the workplace experiences of staff members in this year's operating budgets for Harvard schools and departments. In most units, expansion plans were delayed and extravagances were eliminated. In many other cases, schools cut back on levels of service to faculty and students. In nearly all areas, various types of staffing were reduced to contain labor costs. Each of these strategies is discussed in more detail below.

Many Harvard units put renovation or construction plans on hold during the last year. In addition, nearly all of the schools and departments initiated efforts to reduce spending on what might be considered luxuries or extravagances. Some examples:

- Parties were cancelled and snacks disappeared from meetings.
- Seminar and colloquium series limited speaker invitations to visitors from New England rather than farther-flung experts, to reduce travel expenses.
- One of the professional schools set a new policy to require coach reservations rather than business class for air travel.

In many sections of the University, budget reduction efforts included some cuts in services to students and faculty, and reduced investment in basic elements of the workplace infrastructure:

- A number of libraries cut hours during which services are provided.
- Some libraries also changed service levels, resulting in longer lines at circulation desks, and pushed materials into circulation with less complete cataloging records.
- Several schools changed formulas for faculty support, providing reduced staff support for teaching and research.
- A number of units cut custodial contracts so that cleaning tasks are performed only every other day.
- At least one school scaled back catering contracts so that regular staff are now responsible for cleaning up catered events.
- Training budgets were cut significantly in many units, and some departments put routine IT hardware replacement programs on hold.

Perhaps the most prevalent and problematic cost-cutting strategy in many Harvard schools and departments this year was to reduce staffing levels, often without any clear plan for a corresponding reduction of activity:

- Many units reduced or eliminated funding for student workers, LHTs (“Less-than-Half-Time” staff), or agency temps, resulting in a significant reduction in the availability of extra help for peak times or high-volume tasks.
- In many cases, regular staff positions vacated as a result of the early retirement program, layoffs, or attrition were not filled.
- A number of departments introduced stricter policies on the approval of overtime work opportunities for staff.

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At this writing, there are about 340 (7%) fewer staff members in HUCTW jobs than there were a year ago, as a result of the combined effects of early retirements, layoffs and attrition. Union members have begun expressing urgent concerns in recent months that there are real strains arising out of this significant reduction of the support staff workforce. It is important to note that, in our members’ experiences, the lower staffing levels have not for the most part been matched by diminished academic activity or service expectations. In nearly every corner of the University, HUCTW members are working hard and creatively, trying to figure out how to do the same great Harvard work with fewer people and constrained resources.

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The short- and long-term consequences of reduced staffing levels and scarce resources are not a familiar subject for most in the Harvard community. Strategies for coping with scarcity represent a new discussion for the vast majority of staff, managers, faculty, and students in our environment. We all have a lot to learn about the effects of reduced staffing on the quality of our work, employee health, productivity, opportunities for learning and professional development, and work-life balance. But the early indications, from an ongoing conversation among HUCTW members, are that we have reasons for serious concern in all of these areas.

At the same time, there are indications in recent weeks that the Harvard economy has begun to recover. Statements from the deans of several schools have conveyed optimism that the hardest moments are behind us and, while the need for fiscal restraint remains, planning for next year and beyond can be based on more hopeful assumptions. It is also encouraging to hear strong, credible voices calling for reform and increased accountability in Harvard’s investing and fiscal management practices.

If the University financial picture continues to improve, we can expect to see an increasingly urgent hope among staff members that the current situation is not Harvard's "new normal." Much of our Union's work in the next year will be dedicated to fostering a healthy dialogue among staff, administrators, and faculty about where funding and staffing levels can most appropriately be restored as recovering budgets allow. In slowly-recovering areas where staffing levels cannot be increased, union members may offer suggestions for reasonable and necessary reductions in services.

Reasonable people will agree that the University cannot responsibly return to the rapid expansion mode of several years ago, and that clearly extravagant expenses should not be reinstated. However, laying plans for the restoration of service standards and staffing levels will be more complex and controversial. Our primary goal is to ensure that the thoughtful voices of hard-working HUCTW members are heard and that important concerns about the negative impact of understaffing are strongly represented and addressed with constructive action as the discussion about priorities goes forward.

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