

Guest Speaker: Dr. Kelly Damphousse

Comments have been edited/paraphrased.

Opening Remarks

It's really important for me to have a really open line of communication with both faculty and staff councils. And so that's the first thing I'll say. Second thing is a reminder to you that you all don't work for me. I work for you.

I'm here to serve you all, and I can serve you best when you explain to me how I can help you. And if we ever leave a meeting and you haven't told me things that I need to be working on, then we probably didn't have a very good meeting. I want to create that kind of relationship with you all where you all feel comfortable talking to me about things you need, because I understand what it's like to be working in an organization where you don't feel like your voice is heard.

Commission on Student Success

The business that we're in is changing the lives of the students who come here. It's the commission that will touch the widest number of people because it's everyone's job to make sure our students are successful. Staff are more likely to be interacting with our students in a time when they are expressing the needs that they have.

We're looking at all kinds of things having to do with student success. Mostly aimed at metrics that are easily measured like first-year retention, graduation rates. But we're looking at everything along the way because everything else feeds into those metrics. I think that most people understand that finances and academics play a huge role in student retention and graduation and success. But there's another thing that is very important. That is how engaged they feel, how connected they feel socially. And staff members play a huge role in having students feel connected. I charged them with the goal to start working on smoothing the hills and straightening the curves for our students and for our staff and faculty who serve our students.

Commission on the Run to R1

Our goal is to become an R1 institution by 2027. We would do it sooner if we could, but they only do that review every three years. The next one is 2024, and we're not quite ready yet. We'll spend the next couple of years getting ready for that.

We only have 12 PhD granting programs in the university. That's way below what we need to have. There was a time when the coordinating board wouldn't allow us to have PhD programs. Once we were allowed to, it just takes a long time to build programs. If we can double the number of PhD graduates in those 12 programs, and then double the number of PhD programs

in three or four years and start producing PhDs at a rapid rate, those are some areas that we'll look at.

I'm also doing some reconfiguring of what our faculty are doing since our faculty have a relatively high teaching load for an R1 institution. Research active faculty may need to teach less, so they have more time for research and for working with graduate students and so on. So it's a very systemic approach and it will take a lot of time and some resources there.

Recruitment Taskforce

We're actually doing very good in recruiting freshmen. We had the biggest freshmen class in history. So kudos to you all that are involved in that. But we're not doing well in transfers. We're not doing well in the graduate student world as well. So while our freshmen class was up 14%, our overall enrollment was basically flat - up 0.2% or 0.3%. So we're working a lot with that task force to look at things. Can we attract more international students to come here? Can we look more at out-of-state students, non-residents? Can we look into the online space and see if we can have more online students taking classes?

Administrative Burdens Taskforce

We also have a taskforce on administrative burdens. I don't know exactly how things work here. I do know that when I first got here, the most common thing and I heard from people was about bureaucracy and red tape and how long it takes to buy things and so on. We actually got that task force started early on and we've already changed things. There were 57 units that had to make some kind of outcome assessment report. We cut that in half already. So that's just one thing we're doing.

Taskforces and Commissions

All the taskforces and commissions are composed of people who are data gatherers. I've encouraged all of them to provide or create opportunities to get input from others, either through online surveys, through focus groups, through town hall meetings, by holding panels where people can come present, and so on. Bringing in outside speakers, going to see what people are doing in other places. Looking at what other people have done in the past and especially the Run to R1. And so even though you're not on a task force or a committee or a commission, you'll have an opportunity for your voice to be heard through that process as well.

The task forces have pretty short time-frames. I've asked them to give me their report in January. They will report to us. We will act in the spring, and then we'll get back to them, and then they'll kind of maybe accept our changes and maybe encourage us to do more. And they actually may collect more data, have more insight later on. But we really need to hear from

them early. The commissions will last for a long time, at least until they've completed their task, and maybe beyond that. But the task forces need to act quickly.

Questions and Answers

What are some of the thoughts on working towards retaining our employees?

That's something that the cabinet brought to me before I heard it from staff. They are really concerned about this because it's not just retention, it's recruitment as well. We're in an ultra-competitive environment right now. And also associated with that is morale, because morale affects retention. One of the first things that we did was to provide that the third bonus amount that you all will be getting in November.

I don't like giving across-the-board percentage-wise bonuses because that means that the people who get paid more get bigger bonuses than the people who get paid less. And so that's why we came up with the \$1,000 bonus for everybody.

The slightly longer-term is building into next year's budget a raise. That's a high priority for me. The way to do that is getting more students here. Retaining more students gives us more tuition revenue. And tuition revenue is our number one driver of revenue. So if we can get more students here and retain more students, we'll have more revenue, and we can use that to give a raise. But that's the number one priority for me is raises for faculty and for staff.

Number two priority is equity raises. There's a lot of ways of looking at equity. But in the staff realm, we have a lot of people who are making Texas minimum wage. That has to be the first step is trying to attack that lowest base of pay to get that up to a certain level. We can't do it all at one time. But I think staff morale will improve if they know that we've got a plan in place where we can step those people up.

Here's another equity problem though. It's a complicated stair-step thing where our supervisors are always making a little bit more than the people who work for them. So that's a long-term effect of first trying to get the resources together to get a raise, and then building everyone's pay structure in such a way that we maintain differences between subordinates and supervisors. But also to get the lowest paid people up to a salary where they can afford to work here.

The third thing is looking at benefits. Don't quote me on this. Don't hold me to this, but we would like to look at a tuition waiver for employees. It really is a great benefit for people who have college aged children or high school aged children, that they can look forward to that. That's a benefit that a lot of universities have that a lot of people would find beneficial. It's just an example of things we can do.

We also negotiated with Chartwells to greatly reduce the cost of meals at our cafeteria for employees. I think it now costs \$6 to eat at campus cafeterias. To be able to eat on campus,

first off, helps you feel engaged, makes your life a little bit more convenient. But it also puts you in the cafeteria where you're getting to interact with students and faculty and staff together in the same space, which I really love.

What I didn't mention yet, and it's also part of the budget is trying to rebuild our staff in numbers. We're down around 180 staff members and faculty members from pre-COVID era. Some of those people probably don't need to be replaced, because we may not have needed them the first place. But there's other places where we do need more people. We think we can help with retention and morale if we hire more people as well. And that's a longer-term plan. We actually asked each of the Vice Presidents on the cabinet to submit a plan, kind of a wishlist for how many people they would like to hire. And now we're just culling through and seeing what we can hire. We have to build up the budgets to be able to do this, but we can't wait to do some of these things. We have to do it now. So we'll start rebuilding our employee base by adding more people to it as well.

When we're replacing a staff person in a department right now, the new person as being hired at a higher rate than the person that's already been here for three years in the same position. I don't know what we can do about that, but that does not work.

I actually think it's good to hire new people as high as you can. There has been a history of universities that don't perform well in morale and pay of supervisors who always hire people who make less than them. And when you do that, you stifle your salary over time. If you keep doing this, what happens? You end up saying, well, everyone's in the right place. Let's just move everybody up half percent, 2%, 1%.

And so it just never grows, and you don't keep up with the market because the market is changing. So, my encouragement to employers is to pay the market rate for your new hires, and then come back with equity money and fix that issue. If you've got an employee who's making \$10 an hour and that person has been here for four years, and you've got to hire someone to work with her, and you've got to pay \$12 an hour to get them here - well, let's hire at \$12 and then let's work to get your employee making \$10 up higher. So for a while, it will hurt that Jenny is making more than Sue when Jenny just got here. But eventually Sue will make more than Jenny because we'll make up for that.

You have to have faith in the system to feel comfortable in that. And I hope I'll be able to show how that works in time. So that's my goal.

My question concerns the use it or lose it policy, which occurs at the end of every fiscal year. Departments will spend money that they have leftover simply so that their budgets are not cut in the following year. In my mind this promotes needless spending and disincentivizes savings instead of rewarding departments for coming under budget. Wouldn't this money be better utilized and other areas such as payroll bonuses within the department?

I have never been a fan of use it or lose it. I'm surprised to hear that we have a use it or lose it. There's pockets of money all over campus where people have been not using it and not losing it. So we're in a position right now where we need to start spending that money when we have it. I spoke recently with a department, and they have like \$1.3 million in reserves and they're afraid to spend it because they worked a long time to save that money, I think it's time for us to have a plan to spend that money. I don't agree with use it or lose it policies because it promotes the terrible kinds of actions where people are buying a thousand paperclips at the end of the year, or we've got some money here, let's buy coffee cups, and then you've got a closet full of cups that you don't really need. I agree with whoever asked the question that use it or lose it is a terrible fiscal practice and if we have it, we should curtail it.

One of the things you talked about is how when you raise a staff member's pay that their supervisor shouldn't be making the same amount as them. And so, you would raise a supervisor's pay as well. What I'm finding when I'm researching pay is that when you hit a certain level at Texas State your pay is well above the national average pay for that position. But what I'm going to refer to as lower-level staff pay salaries are well below national averages at Texas State. So there seems to be a real inequity there. If we already have supervisors and directors and assistant directors who are well above national averages. Why continue raising their pay when staff members get raises as well?

I want to clarify. I'm not saying raise everyone's pay. What I'm saying is when you've got a lower level supervisor who's got an employee that they supervise, and they're making basically the same and both of them are underpaid, that we need to figure out how to raise both of those. So I'm not talking about raising the Vice Presidents' pays or the Associate Vice Presidents and so on. I'm talking about raising the people who are on the lowest end of the scale up. I have seen some data that show that some of our folks are paid at market level at the highest end.

A lot of universities, probably every university I've been to, the people who are doing the hiring of the lowest level don't want to pay someone more than they're getting paid. But at the highest level when you're recruiting someone to move here from Michigan, you have to pay what they were making at Michigan to come here. And that's why those people get paid higher. And the people who are being hired locally tend to be caught in a situation where their bosses don't want to pay them too much, because then you're gonna make more than I am. And so that's the history of how this happens. We've got to break that cycle. We've got to get

our lower-level supervisors to advocate for their staff to get paid more, knowing that eventually that means that they will get paid more and that's how you stair step that up.

I also have data on separation interviews, what people tell us when they leave here. Salary is number one. What was actually interesting is that remote work is becoming a strong number two, now. People have an opportunity to stay at home and work and get paid maybe the same. But they are taking that opportunity because they'd rather do that. So the work style is the issue more than pay.

I've been here almost 20 years, and what I've noticed is that anytime we have any sort of review on campus to determine equity in salary or whether we're using our positions appropriately is that like you said, you reached out to the council. You got guidance from the council. But, a lot of times those council members don't consult with those of us in the trenches that are actually working with the different departments across campus. So I want to know what are your thoughts on the best way to make the entire staff population more aware of how they can make these requests and put this information forward to where we're really utilizing the resources appropriately in the areas that we really need them. For example, our key shop has been massively understaffed for years. There are three people serving two campuses, and I've got staff members that still can't get into offices even though they've been here since June, July, August.

The question is about people who are overwhelmed with their jobs and not having the opportunity to express their voice. So first-off, email is easy, I think. People email me all the time, although oftentimes when they email me, I'm sending it off to somebody else. It's the first time I've heard anyone say that there weren't enough employees in the key shop. Because you know what my experience has been - when I ask for a key, I get a key in 20 minutes, but not everyone's the president, right? And so for me, the key shop's working great. Now I hear this problem here. That's a simple email to someone saying, Hey, I'm having a problem here. And so communication is a two-way street and we are desperately yearning for you all to ask us and tell us and inform us and inspire us to do better.

When faculty get other job opportunities, the university has an opportunity to put forward a retention package. Every time a staff position has been in the same situation, there is no offer, no opportunity. It's just - Thank you for your time. Good luck in your new position. That hurts us as an institution.

I've actually been engaged at my level in several cases where we had a staff member who had been offered a job somewhere else, and their cabinet member over their division came to me and said, we've got to do something. So we counter-offered and retained those people. And so we actually do retention packages for staff members. And so that's changing. If

you haven't seen that, it's happening. There's a requirement every time we raise someone's salary over 10%, I have to approve that. And I've signed probably 25 letters or memos like that since I've been here, which means we're proactively saying, hey, Kristen's, such a great employee, we don't want to lose her. And she's changed positions and she's taken on more duties. We need to give her a raise and she's making \$40,000 now we want to make her \$50,000. So there is process in there.

This brings up a great point. I was going to mention it earlier. I'm really concerned about the churn that happens. I think it's perfectly fine for someone who wants to advance through a system. But I get concerned when, for example, an administrative assistant I moves to the same job in another department because that college pays more than this one. That hurts the losing department because you've lost all the institutional memory. If that employee said, Hey boss, they're offering \$15 an hour and I'm making \$13. I don't want to go, but I will because that's \$2.00 more an hour. If that boss wants to keep that employee, they should be advocating, I need \$2.00 more to pay my administrative assistant. That's how this is supposed to work. I'd much rather do that than have that person leave, and then the other department has to hire someone off the street. It's so disruptive to a department to lose someone who is the heart of that department, who's been there for 20 years and knows how to do all the things that need to be done.