Were the Life Matters counselors available by phone and by Zoom?
Yes, I believe they are available in a variety of ways. Zoom is our ministry-wide platform.

How do you handle equipment needs (monitors, special chairs, etc.) in hybrid models? Should the individual be provided with these resources for both workspaces – home and office? There is an obvious cost impact.
At Mercy College, we had been moving to laptops as opposed to PCs for employees, even prior to the pandemic, in order to provide more flexibility. We ramped up that project once the pandemic started. We had also begun providing additional monitors to employees prior to the pandemic, as many employees benefitted from the use of two monitors in their offices. We did not have major issues with chairs, but we did allow employees to take office chairs to their homes. Once we return to the office in a fuller capacity, we will have to take stock of how many employees who are working in a hybrid fashion will need chairs for home and/or the office.

How does all of this data in support of flexible work align with the reality that many employers and higher ed institutions are holding on so tightly to the idea of a “return to normal”?
For Mercy College, I acknowledge we are not in the same position as many other institutions who have a more traditional student body with athletics and housing, etc., which presents more challenges in terms of offering flexible work. It is important to remember that some positions lend themselves to flexible work more than others. In admissions, for example, counselors can contact prospects using phone and email, which can be done from home, but when it comes to offering tours, those need to be done in person.

How can HR work to build trust with leaders who are worried/overwhelmed by the idea of managing a remote workforce and feel an increased need to micromanage?
I think at Mercy College we have discovered as a leadership team that it is possible to achieve goals and measure outcomes in a completely remote work environment, not just for ourselves, but for our entire team of faculty and staff. I think increased communication in the form of planned Zoom meetings with direct reports and quarterly employee check-ins have helped in building trust.
How do you handle employees that live in another state and want to work from home? Which leave laws and employment laws do you follow? How do you handle the tax complications? Do you have employees enter their work location in their timecard system?

Each state’s laws are different, and there is a wealth of information and updates out there regarding employment laws, compliance and work location, especially as affected by COVID. In addition to consulting a tax or employment attorney, we suggest you work with the payroll specialist at your institution.

How did you coordinate with other units on campus to develop a policy that affects non-employees such as students, vendors, etc.?

We have created a compliance matrix that identifies different compliance areas and compliance partners in each of those areas. Any policy that addresses that compliance area has to involve those partners, as well as the policy owner, who is either the president or one of the three vice presidents. The compliance partners and policy owners work together to develop or revise policies, and part of the development includes the scope of the policy, which identifies all the parties to which it applies.

Are you still accepting accommodation requests now that a vaccine is available?

As far as I know, we are still accepting accommodation requests even though a vaccine is available. We accept accommodation requests for medical reasons or sincerely-held religious beliefs regarding current mandatory vaccinations, and right now, the COVID vaccine is not mandatory.

How do you feel dealing with employee performance issues will change in the future with remote work?

I think it will become even more necessary for managers to be clear and explicit about their expectations. The quarterly employee check-ins have helped with this, in that managers provide more timely feedback.

What types of activities are you planning to welcome faculty and staff back to working on campus? How have you thanked those who have been working on campus during the pandemic?

At Mercy College, which is part of the bigger Bon Secours Mercy Health system, employees at a certain level and above were given a cash award. This was not part of returning to campus but just in response to the pandemic. However, it is also important to figure out in what way employees would like to be thanked or rewarded. We recently started a recognition program, Called to Shine, which allows for immediate recognition across the institution, not just those in individual work groups. Employees can earn points through recognition toward merchandise as well.
How do you explain decisions for full return when leadership has spent the last 18 months praising how great the employees have been working from home?
I think one key point is that the pandemic presented extraordinary circumstances, and we all deserve praise for dealing with those circumstances in the best way we could. However, that does not mean fully remote work is the best option for all of our organizations, at least for all employees. Part of the college experience requires presence, and employees are part of that.

Would you share the questions/process/structure for your quarterly check-ins?
Quarterly check-ins are due March 31, June 30, September 30, and December 31. There are options to discuss operational as well as professional development goals. There are also the same three reflection questions:

  - What is going well?
  - What support is needed?
  - What other feedback do we need to share with each other?

What are your thoughts about a department head working remotely from another state (non-student-facing) when the person’s staff will be largely on-campus?
I think much of it depends on the culture at your institution — will having a “remote boss” make the on-campus staff members angry or resentful? Do the on-campus employees really need to be on campus or is hybrid or remote work an option for them as well? When a position requires on-campus work for student availability, that must be a consideration also.

Our non-faculty workforce is being hamstrung by the academic leaderships' opposition to a remote/flexible workplace policy because they are concerned faculty will “announce” not “request” to teach remotely. We are a campus that sells the on-campus experience.
I am not familiar with whether your faculty are union or have a CBA, but I would think that faculty, like all employees, are subject to the policies and procedures of your institution. A remote work policy should be written so that it does not provide for employees to be the sole parties who are able to announce or determine what they are doing in terms of remote, hybrid or onsite work. The ability to work remotely should be evaluated by the position, not the person. If your institution sells an on-campus experience, then at least some faculty need to be on campus. I also believe it is important to focus on the mission and values of your institution, which is easier to do for privates.

Should it be standard in your job descriptions if you allow employees to work remote or flexible schedules?
When we post the position, we include if it is on location, hybrid or remote. We do not currently include in the job description.
Are there forms or policies for the Called to Shine program?
There is no policy for Called to Shine – it is run through Achievers, a third-party vendor.

Have other questions you’d like to ask your higher ed HR peers? CUPA-HR Connect is a free online community for higher ed HR pros. Simply post your question in a forum, or subscribe to a forum to keep up with trending conversations.