

Higher education should model better workplace cultures

December 02, 2021 11:30 AM Suri Duitch Dean of Tulane SoPA

Editor's note: The following is an excerpt of an article published on Inside Higher Ed. Read the full text [here](#).

The workplace has been upended. The COVID-19 pandemic has called into question many assumptions regarding how and where we work and which elements of the workplace are necessary and effective and for whom. New consideration is being given to the [lived experiences and the needs of Black people](#), of other racial and gender minorities, and of [neurodivergent](#) workers in a way that was rare just a short time ago. And [workers themselves are making different choices about what constitutes acceptable pay and working conditions](#), and in so doing, they are shifting the long-standing worker/employer balance of power. The workplace is changing in positive and necessary ways, but it also feels in permanent flux.

"Our students face a daunting future at work, and to prepare them, colleges must change how they themselves operate—in positive and necessary ways."

— Suri Duitch, Tulane SoPA Dean

This has an impact on us as educators; we are people who work, too. But it also affects our students, with implications for the years they will spend in the workforce after leaving our programs. Right now, too many higher education institutions do not reflect positive and proactive workplace cultures and values.

For example, shared governance structures are in too many cases poorly implemented or approached cynically. Long-standing hierarchies within institutions (faculty over staff, tenure track over nontenurable) privilege certain voices and, as a result, often silence members of minority groups. Faculty administrators lack preparation and competencies for management, in part because evaluations by the institution do not place value on these skills.

And while [other sectors are certainly facing their own challenges these days](#), one can find within them books, articles and events focused on workplace culture and how to improve it. That kind of ongoing discussion seems to be largely absent within higher education, which desperately needs to evolve as a workplace, both for our own sake and for that of our students.

The tools that colleges and universities rely on to prepare students for careers are also insufficient to meet today's needs. Networking and résumé development only go so far when we don't know the employers of the future, nor how they will connect with prospective employees. Even experiential learning has limits when we can't foresee fundamental components of how work will be experienced 30 years from now.

So, what do our students need to be prepared for their professional futures? Certainly, they need knowledge from their fields of study, good fundamental communication and computation skills, and, ideally, a strong grounding in the humanities and sciences. Just as important, however, are the attributes of flexibility and adaptability, curiosity, empathy, resilience, and proactive thinking—each of which is needed to grapple successfully with unpredictable future circumstances. Amid so much upheaval, workplace success now depends, in part, on an individual's ability to manage uncertainty and navigate through ambiguity, adapt to new technologies, speak up and advocate constructively, and step outside their personal echo chambers to connect with those of differing perspectives and backgrounds.

The article continues on [Inside Higher Ed](#).