The CUPA-HR 2022 Higher Education Employee Retention Survey: Focus on Supervisors

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January 2023

Introduction

Higher ed continues to face a retention crisis. Turnover in any role can impact an institution due to loss of talent, institutional knowledge, and team or interdepartmental rapport. However, turnover in a supervisor role has more far-reaching implications. Supervisor turnover also impacts direct reports, who must adjust to a new supervisor and may need to adapt to new team priorities and vision. Loss of supervisors also equates to a loss of leaders who are key to succession plans. In short, the loss of supervisors impacts not only the current reality of a team or department, but also may shift an institution's direction.

To better understand supervisor retention, this report explores supervisors' likelihood of looking for new employment, their current challenges and working environments, and which job aspects specific to supervisors are associated with their retention. Findings will be presented from CUPA-HR's 2022 *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey* on supervisors in higher ed roles (administrators, professionals, and non-exempt staff).[1] For key findings and recommendations on retaining higher ed employees in general, see our initial report.[2]

This report will focus on the following topics:

- Percentage of supervisors who will likely look for other employment opportunities in the near future
- Supervisor work performed beyond normal hours and duties
- Training and support for supervisors
- Power for supervisors to advocate for their staff
- Current challenges for supervisors

Comparisons by supervisor type are made throughout.

Respondents

This report analyzes data from the 3,815 higher ed administrators, professionals, and non-exempt staff, most (57%) of whom were supervisors, who responded to CUPA-HR's 2022 *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*.

A key distinction throughout this report is supervisor status, which is broken into three groups (Figure 1). "Area supervisors" refer to those supervisors who are the top-most leaders in their department, units, or areas (self-
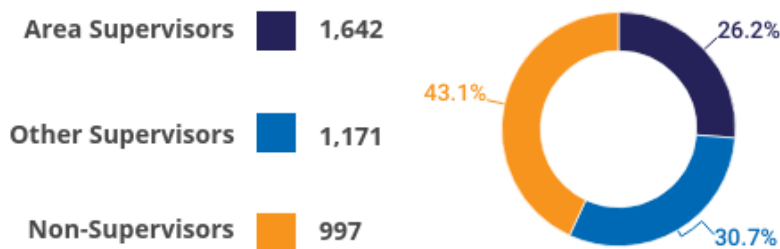
identified in the survey; 26% of respondents). Area supervisors had a median of four direct reports. "Other supervisors" are those who self-identified as having at least one direct report but were not the top-most leader in their department (31% of respondents). Other supervisors had a median of three direct reports. Lastly, "non-supervisors" are those employees who have no direct reports (43% of respondents). In this report, we will use the term "supervisor" to describe findings that collapse across both area supervisors and other supervisors.

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Respondents by Supervisor Status

Area Supervisors	■	1,642
Other Supervisors	■	1,171
Non-Supervisors	■	997

26.2%
43.1%
30.7%

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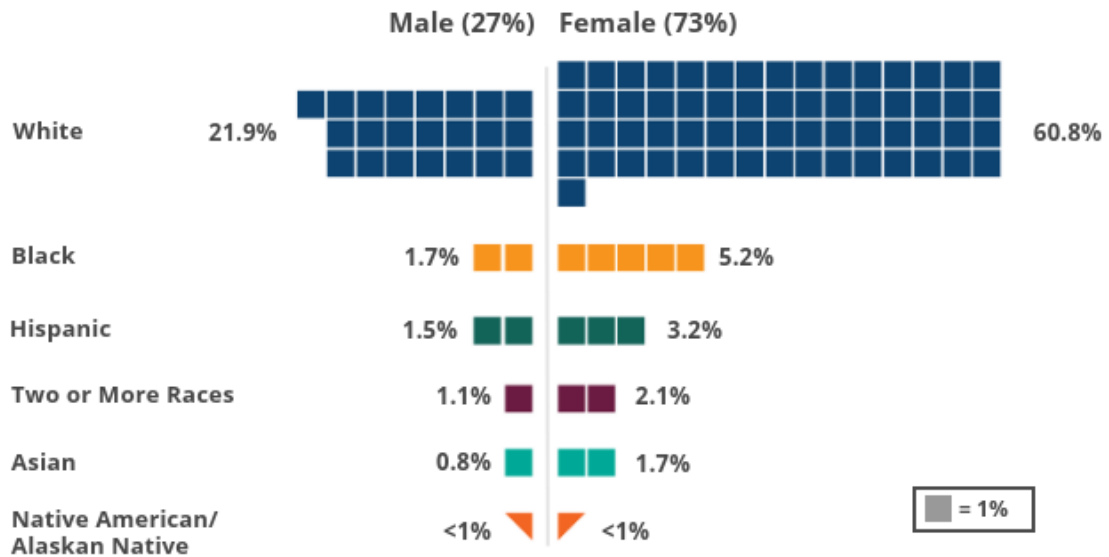
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Figure 1. Respondents by Supervisor Status

Most of the supervisors in the sample were White women (61%) or White men (22%), followed by Black women (5%) and Hispanic women (3%) (see Figure 2).[3]

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[3] The remainder of this section focuses on supervisor respondent demographics only; for demographics and details of the overall sample, see Bichsel et al. (2022).

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY
Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Supervisor Respondents

Male (27%)   Female (73%)

Race/Ethnicity	Male	Female
White	21.9%	60.8%
Black	1.7%	5.2%
Hispanic	1.5%	3.2%
Two or More Races	1.1%	2.1%
Asian	0.8%	1.7%
Native American/Alaskan Native	<1%	<1%

= 1%

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Figure 2. Gender and Race/Ethnicity of Supervisor Respondents

Supervisors represented a variety of departments/areas (Figure 3). The largest proportion of supervisor respondents worked in human resources (26%), followed by student affairs (25%). The relative proportions of departments/areas are similar among area supervisors and other supervisors. All analyses in this report collapse across department/area.
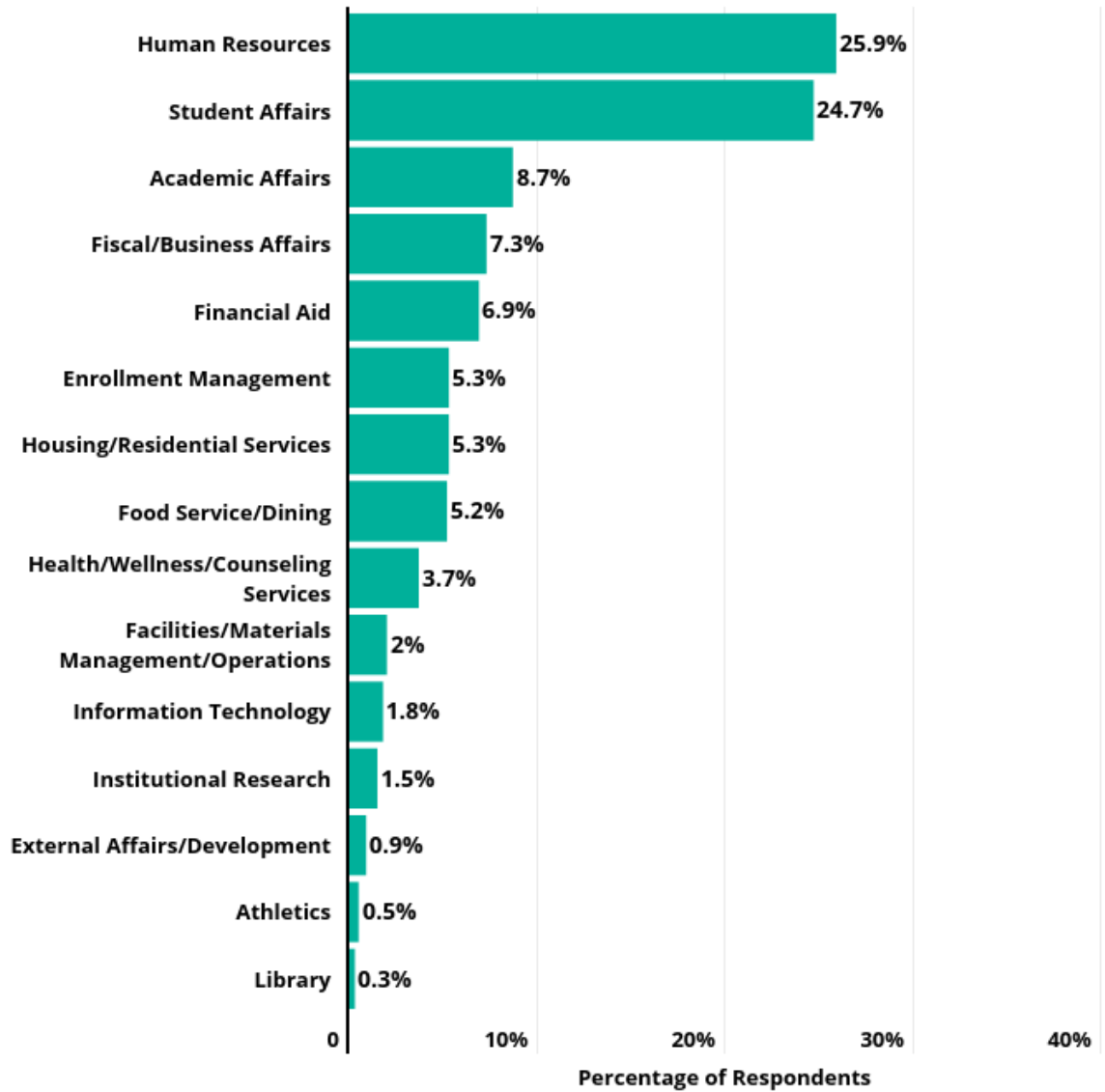
Departments/Areas of Supervisor Respondents

Department/Area	Percentage
Human Resources	25.9%
Student Affairs	24.7%
Academic Affairs	8.7%
Fiscal/Business Affairs	7.3%
Financial Aid	6.9%
Enrollment Management	5.3%
Housing/Residential Services	5.3%
Food Service/Dining	5.2%
Health/Wellness/Counseling Services	3.7%
Facilities/Materials Management/Operations	2%
Information Technology	1.8%
Institutional Research	1.5%
External Affairs/Development	0.9%
Athletics	0.5%
Library	0.3%

Percentage of Respondents

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Figure 3. Departments/Areas of Supervisor Respondents

Nearly Two in Five Supervisors Will Look for Other Employment in the Near Future

Figure 4 shows the likelihood that employees will look for other employment in the next 12 months. The likelihood of seeking employment did not significantly vary by supervisor status. Thirty-six percent of supervisors indicated they are likely or very likely to look for other employment in the next 12 months.
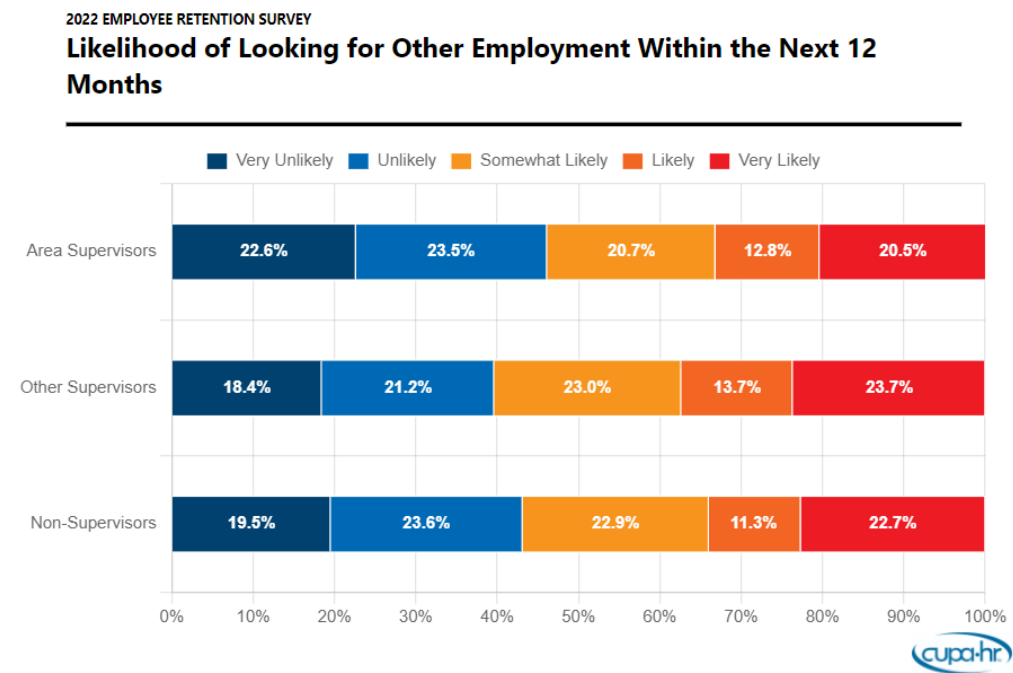
2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY
Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next 12 Months

	Very Unlikely	Unlikely	Somewhat Likely	Likely	Very Likely
Area Supervisors	22.6%	23.5%	20.7%	12.8%	20.5%
Other Supervisors	18.4%	21.2%	23.0%	13.7%	23.7%
Non-Supervisors	19.5%	23.6%	22.9%	11.3%	22.7%

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Figure 4. Supervisors' Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment

Employees who responded they were somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to look for other employment opportunities provided details about the reasons why they would seek other employment opportunities. Pay is overwhelmingly the most common cited reason for why higher ed employees are seeking other employment. Area supervisors cite pay as a reason for

looking for other employment opportunities less frequently (64%) than other supervisors or non-supervisors (79% and 80% respectively).

Employees who responded they were somewhat likely, likely, or very likely to look for other employment opportunities were also asked to select all the different types of organizations in which they would look for employment opportunities. Only 28% of area supervisors indicated their current institution as one of the places they would consider seeking employment, while roughly half of other supervisors (49%) and non-supervisors (47%) indicated they would consider their current institution.

Most Supervisors Work Long Hours

Figure 5 shows the proportion of employees by supervisor type who work more hours each week than what is considered full-time at their institution.[4] Supervisors are more likely than non-supervisors to work additional hours. Fewer than half (47%) of non-supervisors work more hours than what is considered full-time. However, most supervisors (89% of area supervisors and 76% of other supervisors) work more hours per week than what is considered full-time at their institution.

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[4] Data in Figure 5 were obtained by calculating the difference between the number of hours each participant typically works per week and the number of hours their institution considers full-time.

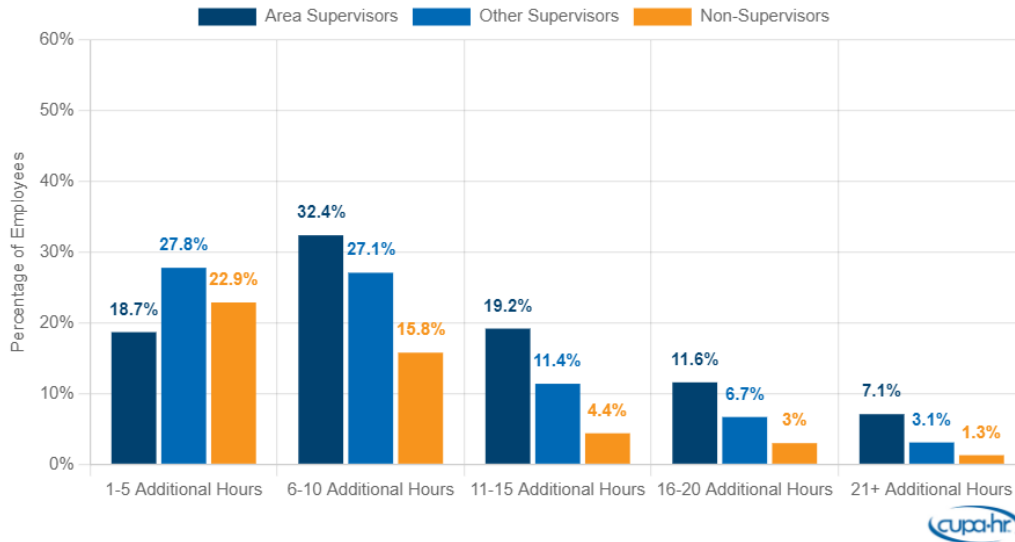**Distribution of Weekly Additional Hours Worked by Supervisor Type**

Legend: ■ Area Supervisors ■ Other Supervisors ■ Non-Supervisors

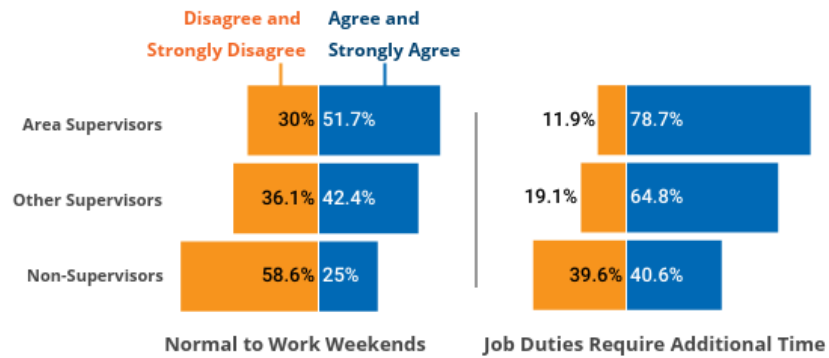| Additional Hours	Area Supervisors	Other Supervisors	Non-Supervisors
1-5 Additional Hours	18.7%	27.8%	22.9%
6-10 Additional Hours	32.4%	27.1%	15.8%
11-15 Additional Hours	19.2%	11.4%	4.4%
16-20 Additional Hours	11.6%	6.7%	3%
21+ Additional Hours	7.1%	3.1%	1.3%

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Figure 5. Distribution of Weekly Additional Hours Worked by Supervisor Type

Higher concentrations of supervisors versus non-supervisors agree that their job demands require working additional hours (Figure 6). Moreover, working additional hours is related to higher ranks of supervision. Nearly four-fifths (79%) of area supervisors agree that their job duties require working additional hours, and nearly two-thirds (65%) of other supervisors agree that their job duties require working additional hours. Only two in five (41%) non-supervisors report that their job duties require working additional hours. Further, more area supervisors (52%) indicate they work weekends versus other supervisors (42%). Only 25% of non-supervisors report that it is normal to work on weekends.

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Work Demands by Supervisor Type

Disagree and Strongly Disagree — Agree and Strongly Agree

	Normal to Work Weekends		Job Duties Require Additional Time	
Area Supervisors	30%	51.7%	11.9%	78.7%
Other Supervisors	36.1%	42.4%	19.1%	64.8%
Non-Supervisors	58.6%	25%	39.6%	40.6%

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Figure 6. Work Demands by Supervisor Type

Supervisors Have Absorbed More Duties Since the Onset of the Pandemic

Supervisors have borne more of the brunt of increased work expectations since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic when compared to non-supervisors (Figure 7).[5] Supervisors (68%) are more likely than non-supervisors (55%) to agree that they absorbed additional responsibilities of other staff who have left the institution since the onset of COVID-19. Supervisors (74%) are also more likely than non-supervisors (55%) to report that they experienced an increase in job expectations since the start of the pandemic.

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[5] Bichsel et al., 2022.

Changes in Work Expectations Since Onset of COVID-19
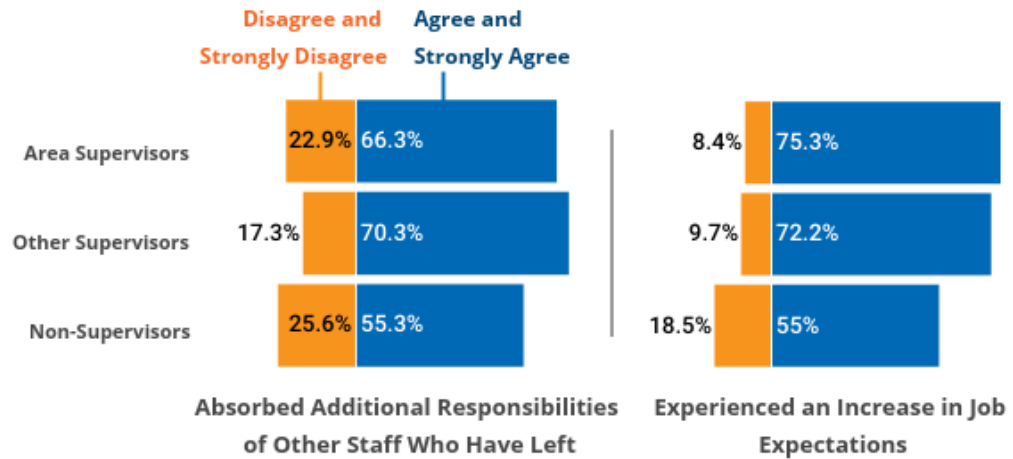
Figure 7. Changes in Work Expectations Since Onset of COVID-19

Filling Positions and Maintaining Morale Are Supervisors' Top Challenges

Figure 8 shows the perceived challenges unique to supervisors.[6] Supervisors' top challenges are filling empty positions and maintaining staff morale. Almost two-thirds (63%) of supervisors indicated they find filling positions very challenging and over half (54%) found maintaining staff morale very challenging. In contrast, only 14% of supervisors find managing remote staff very challenging, with almost half (45%) indicating this is not at all challenging.

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[6] Respondents who self-identified as supervisors were asked to rate how challenging six items were using a three-point scale of Very Challenging, Somewhat Challenging, and Not Challenging.
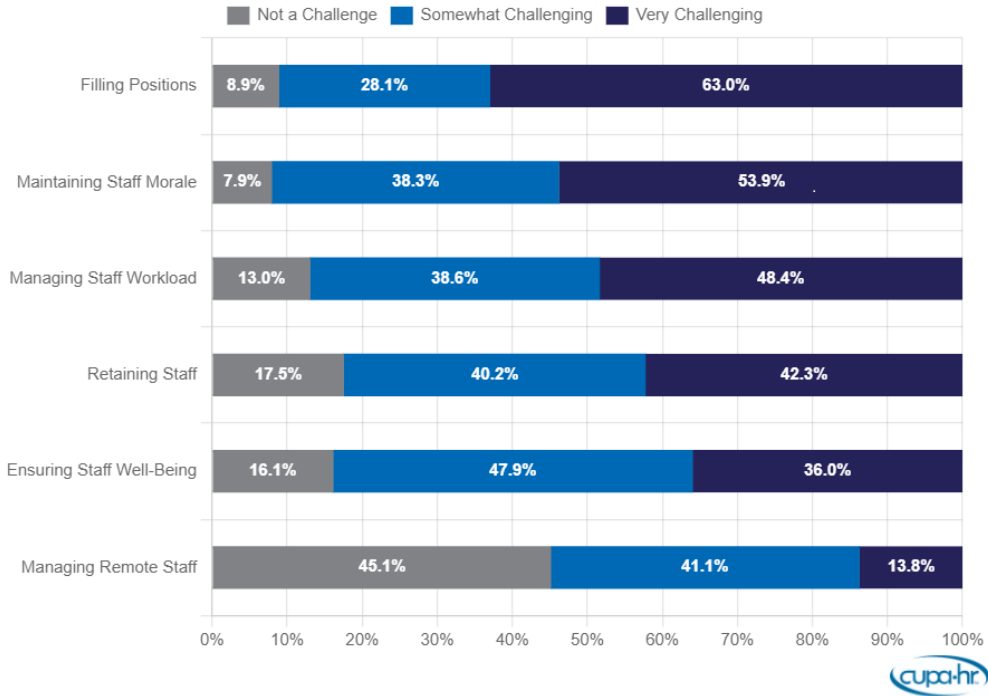
2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY
Supervisor Challenges

Legend: Not a Challenge | Somewhat Challenging | Very Challenging

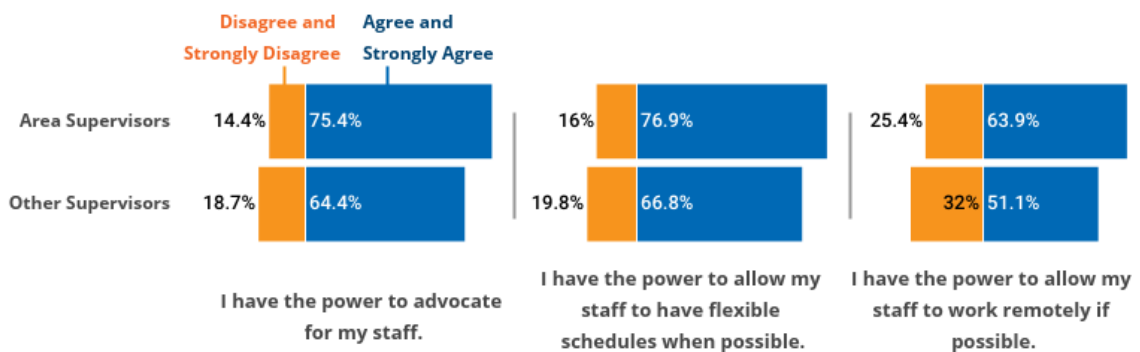| Category	Not a Challenge	Somewhat Challenging	Very Challenging
Filling Positions	8.9%	28.1%	63.0%
Maintaining Staff Morale	7.9%	38.3%	53.9%
Managing Staff Workload	13.0%	38.6%	48.4%
Retaining Staff	17.5%	40.2%	42.3%
Ensuring Staff Well-Being	16.1%	47.9%	36.0%
Managing Remote Staff	45.1%	41.1%	13.8%

Figure 8. Supervisor Challenges

Apart from managing remote staff, area supervisors experience greater challenges than other supervisors on all the items. Over two-thirds (67%) of area supervisors find filling positions very challenging and over half (52%) find managing staff workload very challenging, compared to just 59% and 45% of other supervisors respectively. Supervisors who have four or more direct reports perceived all items asked as more challenging than other supervisors, particularly when asked about managing staff workload. Over half (53%) of supervisors with four or more employees find managing staff workload very challenging, which is notably higher than supervisors with less than four employees (41%).

Supervisors Generally Have the Power to Make Decisions for Their Staff, but Training and Support Are Lacking

Figure 9 illustrates whether or not supervisors believe they have power to make decisions about their direct reports' experiences and working conditions. Area supervisors are consistently more likely to agree that they have power to shape direct reports' working conditions than other supervisors. Of the three aspects we assessed, supervisors are most likely to agree that they have the power to allow their staff to have flexible schedules (77% of area supervisors and 67% of other supervisors), followed by the power to advocate for their staff (75% of area supervisors and 64% of other supervisors). Lower proportions of supervisors agree that they have the power to allow their staff to work remotely if possible (64% of area supervisors and 51% of other supervisors). One-quarter (25%) of area supervisors and nearly one-third (32%) of other supervisors disagree that they have the power to allow their staff to work remotely.

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Power by Supervisor Type

	Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Agree and Strongly Agree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Agree and Strongly Agree		Disagree and Strongly Disagree	Agree and Strongly Agree
Area Supervisors	14.4%	75.4%		16%	76.9%		25.4%	63.9%
Other Supervisors	18.7%	64.4%		19.8%	66.8%		32%	51.1%
	I have the power to advocate for my staff.			I have the power to allow my staff to have flexible schedules when possible.			I have the power to allow my staff to work remotely if possible.	

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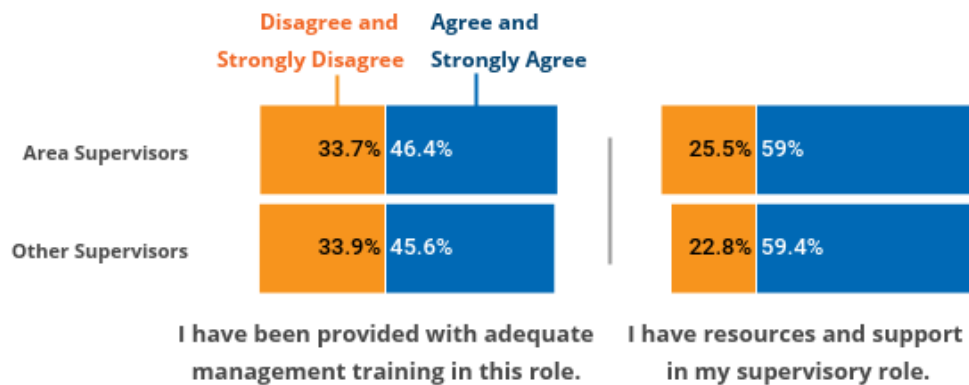
Figure 9. Power by Supervisor Type

Figure 10 explores whether or not supervisors receive training and support for their supervisory role. Area supervisors and other supervisors are relatively similar in their perceptions of training and support. Only three in five (59%) supervisors agree that they have resources and support in their supervisory role. Less than half (46%) of supervisors agree that they have been provided with adequate management training for their supervisory role. Supervisors are working considerable additional hours, but they also lack resources, support, and adequate training in their roles. Lack of adequate support in their supervisor role is likely one underlying reason why supervisors work so many additional hours — supervisors who reported receiving more resources and support in their supervisory role reported working fewer additional hours.[7]

2022 EMPLOYEE RETENTION SURVEY

Supervisor Training and Support by Supervisor Type

Figure 10. Supervisor Training and Support by Supervisor Type

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[7] $r(138) = -.101, p < .001$

Supervisors With Support Are Less Likely to Seek Other Employment

Supervisors' support, power to advocate for their staff, and power to make decisions about their staff's working environment is important to their retention. Table 1 presents the results of a multiple regression analysis investigating whether supervisor training, resources, power to advocate for staff, and power to shape staff work environment predict the likelihood that supervisors will seek other employment opportunities in the next 12 months.[8] Multiple regression allows us to explore the degree to which each job aspect uniquely predicts the likelihood that supervisors will seek other employment, controlling for each of the other aspects included in the analysis. Multiple regression also allows us to examine which aspects are relatively stronger predictors of seeking other employment.

Table 1 lists the results of the multiple regression analysis. Job aspects that have standardized beta coefficients (β; column 4 of Table 1) with larger absolute values (i.e., values further from zero, whether they are positive or negative) are stronger predictors of the likelihood to seek other employment than the other job aspects. In this analysis, negative standardized beta coefficients indicate that the more supervisors experience a particular job aspect, the less likely they are to seek other employment.

All job aspects except being provided with adequate management training negatively predict seeking other employment, indicating that the more supervisors experience each job aspect, the less likely they are to seek other employment. Supervisors are less likely to seek other employment if they receive more resources and support in their supervisory roles, more power

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[8] The analysis in Table 1 regressed supervisors' likelihood of looking for other employment onto whether they agree they have adequate management training, resources and support in their supervisory role, power to advocate for their staff, power to allow flexible schedules for their staff, and power to allow their staff to work remotely. The overall model was significant, $F(5, 1,881) = 86.88$, $p < .001$, adjusted $R^2 = .19$.

to advocate for their staff, more power to allow flexible schedules, and more power to allow their staff to work remotely.

Of the job aspects examined here, the strongest predictor (and thus the most important aspect) is being provided with resources and support in the supervisory role, followed by power to advocate for staff. Power to allow flexible schedules and to allow staff to work remotely are relatively weaker predictors compared to the other two job aspects. Notably, though being provided with resources and support in the supervisory role is the most important predictor of supervisor retention, only 59% of supervisors agree they have resources and support.

Table 1. **Predictors of Supervisors' Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment (Presented in Descending Order From Strongest to Weakest Predictor)**

Multiple Regression Predictors of Likelihood of Looking for Other Employment Within the Next 12 Months

Predictor	b	95% CI	β	t	p
Resources and support in my supervisory role	-0.31	[-0.39, -0.23]	-.22	-7.55	.000
Power to advocate for my staff	-0.24	[-0.32, -0.17]	-.18	-6.48	.000
Power to allow my staff to work remotely	-0.09	[-0.16, -0.03]	-.08	-2.69	.007
Power to allow flexible schedules for my staff	-0.09	[-0.17, -0.01]	-.07	-2.13	.033
Adequate management training	0.01	[-0.06, 0.08]	.01	0.28	.783

Conclusions

These data, focusing on supervisors' responses to the CUPA-HR 2022 *Higher Education Employee Retention Survey*, illuminate the need to not only consider supervisors as a unique population, but also consider how retention efforts need to be tailored for supervisors. The following conclusions can be used to focus retention efforts specific to supervisors.

Higher ed supervisors are looking for other employment opportunities, and less than half would seek new opportunities at their current institution. Nearly two in five (36%) supervisors indicate they are likely to look for other employment in the next 12 months. Like the general higher ed population, supervisors are most likely to cite that they will look for other employment because of a desire for a higher salary. Only 40% of supervisors looking for other employment will seek job opportunities at their current institution, suggesting institutions should anticipate a loss of these leaders in the upcoming year.

Higher ed employees are working harder and longer than ever, but supervisors have borne more increased job expectations than non-supervisors. Most supervisors work additional hours beyond full-time, whereas most non-supervisors do not. This may be partially explained by the fact that supervisors absorbed more responsibilities of vacated positions and experienced more increases in job expectations than did non-supervisors after the onset of COVID-19. Area supervisors were even more likely to absorb additional duties than other supervisors.

Supervisors' top challenges are filling empty positions and maintaining staff morale; managing remote staff is not very challenging. Almost two-thirds of supervisors (63%) find filling positions very challenging and over half (54%) find maintaining staff morale very challenging. These challenges are particularly difficult for area supervisors, who rated almost all job-specific issues as more challenging compared to other supervisors. Few supervisors (14%) find managing remote staff very challenging.

Higher ed supervisors are less likely to look for other employment if they have more support and power to make decisions in their supervisory roles. When supervisors have more resources and support in their supervisory roles, more power to advocate for their staff, more power to allow flexible schedules, and more power to allow their staff to work remotely, they are less likely to seek other employment. The most powerful predictor of seeking new employment is not being provided with resources and support in the supervisory role, followed by not having power to advocate for staff.

Recommendations

Higher ed's retention crisis is not limited to non-supervisory employees — supervisors in higher ed are looking for other employment opportunities, and less than half of those looking will look within their current institution. Turnover in any role can negatively impact an institution, but turnover in a supervisor role can have even more consequences as direct reports must adjust to a new supervisor and institution leaders are forced to shift their succession plans.

The findings of this report provide a data-driven need to take action to retain supervisors. Below are several strategies institutions can use to retain supervisors.

Provide supervisors with resources and support in their capacity as supervisors — focus on helping supervisors fill empty positions and manage staff morale first. Receiving resources and support in their supervisory role is the strongest predictor of supervisors being less likely to seek employment, but only 59% of supervisors agree they have resources and support. Institutions should first target improving resources and support around supervisors' current top two challenges: filling empty positions and managing staff morale. Managing staff workload is also a key challenge.

Ensure supervisors have the power to advocate for their staff. Being empowered to advocate for their staff is the second strongest predictor of supervisors being less likely to seek other employment. Ensure supervisors at your institution have the ability, knowledge, and resources to be able to advocate for their staff.

Give supervisors more autonomy to determine their staff's working arrangements. Supervisors who have more power to allow their staff to work remotely and have flexible schedules are less likely to seek other employment. Provide supervisors with autonomy wherever possible to determine where and when their staff works. Keep in mind that the two most

frequent reasons listed after salary that higher ed employees in general will seek other work are opportunities for remote and flexible work.[9]

Commit to reducing supervisor workload. Most supervisors work additional hours beyond full-time, whereas less than half of non-supervisors do. Supervisors are more likely than non-supervisors to have borne more of the burden of increased management expectations and absorbed responsibilities since the onset of the pandemic, and other supervisors are even more likely to have absorbed responsibilities than area supervisors. The workloads placed on supervisors are likely unsustainable, contributing to burnout and further turnover. Institutions and departments should deploy strategic, intentional efforts to reduce supervisor workload.

If possible, raise salaries, but not at the expense of raises for non-supervisors. Much like the general higher ed workforce, a key reason supervisors look for other employment is to gain a higher salary.[10] This is particularly true of those described as other supervisors in this report. After the onset of the pandemic, higher ed institutions overall provided no salary raises, and when raises returned, they did not keep pace with inflation, even for administrators.[11] All the while, higher ed employees, and particularly supervisors, absorbed more responsibilities. Increasing salaries, particularly for other supervisors, addresses the most common reason why supervisors are looking for other employment. However, the general higher ed workforce (including those who are not supervisors) also cite salary as the number one reason they will look for other employment.[12] Targeting increases specific to supervisors alone may help with supervisor retention but may have the unintended effect of increasing turnover among non-supervisors, who are also seeking raises. In an environment where many institutions face budget challenges, distributing salary increases and adjustments as equitably as possible among supervisors and non-supervisors will be key for overall retention.

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[9] Bichsel et al., 2022.
[10] Ibid.
[11] CUPA-HR. (2022). *Annual Pay Increases by Position Type* [Interactive graphic].
[12] Bichsel et al., 2022.

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