EA Committee on Policies & Benefits Meeting

November 1, 2018

2:00 – 3:00 p.m.

221 Weill Hall

Attendees: Helen, Chari, Tarek, Ellen in person; Karen, Kathy, Anne by phone/internet

# Goals

* Getting to know each other, since there are several new members
* Identifying issues the committee wants to address in Academic Year 18-19
* Developing small teams (2-3 people) to work on each issue

# Action items

1. Please take a look at your calendar; if the meetings from 2:00 – 3:00 that Tarek has proposed do not work for you, please let him know so that he can find a time that works for more members.
2. Review the proposed issues below and consider which one(s) you would be interested in working on. Tarek will let us know when he has posted a sign-up sheet on Yammer, where we can volunteer for the issues that interest us.
3. Tarek will reach out to Laura Johnson Kelly to see if there are notes or documentation on the work that has already been done regarding retirement benefits for new non-exempt employees.
4. Ellen suggested inviting the HR experts to a future meeting to get a sense of their priorities and how they could intersect with the issues we’ll be bringing forward.

# Minutes

**Meeting time/place**

If you find that 2:00 on Thursday afternoon is not a good time to meet, please let Tarek know. He is willing to look at other times that may work better for the group. (For those not in attendance, you missed awesome snacks Ellen brought.)

For those who need to attend virtually, the next meetings are in Mann 100, which should have Zoom capability. If not, Anne has identified a room in ILR that may work well, and Karen offered a space at the Law School.

**Introductions**

Taylor was attending for the first time, so the group took a few minutes to introduce themselves. Committee members represent varied years of experience at Cornell, running the gamut from 3 ½ months to over 30 years.

**Brainstorming: Issues for consideration**

The committee brainstorming session generated a number of issues that we want to explore in the coming academic year. Each is currently associated with a team leader, who is listed under the topic; Tarek will give us an opportunity to volunteer for specific topics via Yammer.

**General feeling of inequality amongst exempt and non-exempt employees**

Many of these topics arise from the exempt/non-exempt distinctions at Cornell. As Anne noted, there are federal regulations requiring the university to distinguish between jobs/employees who are and are not exempt from overtime pay—but the division goes much deeper. Helen’s observation that non-union, non-exempt staff often have fewer opportunities for advancement or professional development prompted Tarek to suggest that in addition to taking on specific policies or practices suggested below, the committee could formulate a resolution to President Pollack calling for greater equity between exempt and non-exempt staff across the university.

*Team lead: Helen*

**Retirement equity for new non-exempt employees**

Last year, the committee explored a policy requiring new non-exempt employees to work for a period of two years before becoming eligible to receive Cornell’s retirement contribution. This is not a vesting period; non-exempt employees simply do not get this generous benefit for two years, while exempt employees qualify immediately. Laura Johnson Kelly served on this committee last year, and the group hopes to build on what had already been done.

*Team lead: Kelly*

**Committee participation policy**

Craig would like the committee to address the fact that some non-exempt staff are unable to participate in committees because the policy allowing staff paid time off to do so is unevenly applied by supervisors. The common clause that time off is granted “at the discretion of the supervisor” can lead to unfairness.

*Team lead: Tarek*

**Equitable flex/release time**

Despite Cornell’s policy offering flex time/release time to all employees, not all supervisors allow employees to take advantage of the policy. This inequity creates work-life balance problems for those staff who cannot participate. Uneven application of the policy also undermines a sense of “One Cornell,” because it causes a rift between those who can and cannot participate.

*Team lead: Ellen*

**Paid time off**

Cornell is promoted as being very generous in terms of paid time off. Tarek is continuing to work on gathering data about how paid time off is managed by peer institutions, to see if Cornell’s policy is competitive. An overview of the analytic work he has done thus far were discussed in the prior meeting. *Team lead: Tarek*

**Time off for voting/elections policy**

Craig also asked the committee to review the current policy regarding paid time off for voting/elections. Does this policy apply only to the employee’s ability to vote, or does it also provide paid time if the employee is providing transportation for others (e.g. a family member or neighbor) who would not otherwise have a way to get to the polls and exercise their voting rights.

*Team lead: Tarek*

**“Redlining” salaries**

For staff who have been in the same position for a long time, some colleges have adopted a “soft policy” of “redlining” salaries. For example, once an employee reaches or exceeds the high end of the salary band as determined by market rate analysis (100% - 120% of the maximum), they no longer receive a standard SIP. Instead, they get a bonus, which has a negative impact on retirement contributions—effectively discriminating against those staff who are affected. Further, allowing colleges to decide if they want to engage in this practice yields inequitable results across campus.

*Team lead: Anne*

**New IRS ruling on student loan contributions from employers**

The IRS has recently ruled that an employer can waive the 401k matching contribution requirement for employees who are using salary to pay off student loans. This allows employees who cannot afford to contribute to their 401k to still get the employer-paid benefit without violating IRS rules or triggering negative tax consequences for the recipient. Karen brought up a related question: Does Cornell’s non-profit status qualify employees for student loan forgiveness programs? Taylor has posted links to further information on both topics to our Yammer group.

*Team lead:* Taylor

**Roth 403(b)**

Tarek indicated that Gordon Barger has received a request to consider offering a Roth option for Cornell’s 403b plan. Unlike a “regular” 403(b), where pre-tax contributions accumulate tax free and are taxable on withdrawal, contributions to a Roth 403(b) are after-tax and accumulations and withdrawals are typically tax free. Many peer institutions offer these plans, and while they are not appropriate for everyone, they can offer benefits to a wide range of employees from those just beginning their work careers with lower salaries and longer investment timelines to well-established faculty and staff who seek tax diversification in their retirement portfolios or want to pass tax-free assets to their beneficiaries.

*Team lead: Chari*

**Increasing deductible options *within* current insurance plans**

Is there a possibility of offering a wider range of deductible options within individual insurance plans that are currently available at Cornell? For example, the Aetna plan currently has one set deductible for a family, but would it be possible to offer an option for a higher family deductible with a lower premium? Or a no-deductible family plan for a higher premium? A greater variety of options could help employees find a plan that meets their needs better.

*Team lead: Kathy*

**Prioritizing internal candidates in hiring**

Variation in whether colleges or units choose to prioritize internal candidates—or not—prompted a question about whether Cornell could do more to hire from within. Taylor noted that Cornell has recently launched an initiative to develop the internal talent pool and ongoing meetings are underway. Still, there is a question of what Cornell’s HR policies require when an internal candidate has been identified as the desired hire—must the position be posted externally every time?

*Team lead: Laura*

**Empire Health Plan Co-pays not meeting plan guidelines**

When an employee sees an in-network physician at Cayuga Medical Center, or some other locations, they send two bills. One is for the physicians services and the second is a hospital access charge. As Empire plan divides the servicing of the bills to United Health Care for physician services and Blue Cross Blue Shield (BCBS) for hospital charges, these two bills go to different processers. United Health handles their bill as normally would happen and leaves a $20 co-pay for the employee. BCBS then has to process the hospital access bill. This is where the problem comes in. Not only are we required to pay an additional co-pay on the hospital charges, they are not consistent in handling this fee.

*Team lead: TBD*