

Note: This is a work-in-progress

KSG New Work Systems at Harvard Design Proposal for the Faculty Assistant Program Executive Summary

Background

The Kennedy School of Government's (KSG) Design Team for the New Work Systems at Harvard (NWSH) project was formed of faculty assistants and administrators in May 2003 to examine issues related to the KSG Faculty Assistant Program. The Design Team was asked to produce a proposal for work design that would benefit faculty assistants, the faculty they support, and KSG. The Design Team operated under a charter provided by its sponsors and guidelines developed by the University Joint Council NWSH Steering Committee.

What is Important to Faculty?

Based on feedback from faculty, their highest priorities for the Faculty Assistant Program are:

- Continuity of one-to-one relationships with their faculty assistants (assistants)—not frequent changes of assigned assistants or a “secretarial pool”.
- The ability to reward and retain high-performing assistants, or other ways to minimize turnover.
- Minimize the number of faculty an assistant supports.
- Review of the support allocations to take into account size and workload of certain courses, and the overhead involved in supporting faculty outreach work.
- Human Resources (HR) addresses poor performance of certain assistants.

What is Important to Faculty Assistants?

Based on feedback from assistants, their highest priorities for the Faculty Assistant Program are:

- Job variety and job growth.
- Promotional opportunities and career development.
- Improvement of the social aspect of the KSG work environment, including feeling less isolated, working with each other and administrative departments collaboratively, receiving recognition for contribution to KSG, not changing to a “secretarial pool” model.
- Support from HR in handling difficult faculty.
- Training beyond the essential services provided to faculty.

What this Design Does Not Propose

This Proposal does not recommend the following:

- Moving to a “pool” model for faculty support.
- Altering the one-to-one work relationships of faculty member and assistant.

The following are outside the scope of this Proposal:

- Current KSG faculty support allocation policy.
- Current KSG policy for faculty to voluntarily “buy” or “sell back” assistant's support time.
- Current University and KSG generic job descriptions.

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What this Design Proposes

- **Work Groups.** Organize assistants into approximately 12 or 13 small work groups to share work and decisions about the work. The boundaries of work group will be aligned with centers or programs where possible so they can be part of existing administrative units. Members of work groups will be located in close proximity to promote communication, coordination and social cohesion. Membership in work groups will be relatively stable to allow assistants to develop familiarity with each other and assigned faculty as well as develop working relationships. Two other kinds of groups will be created along side the regular work groups to address special situations:
 - **Adjunct Faculty Work Group.** Adjunct faculty would be supported as a group by a dedicated work group of assistants. There would not be individual assignments but rather provision of basic services.
 - **Task Forces.** Groups of assistants formed for a limited time to coordinate work and share knowledge for the duration of the activity. Examples include a multi-faculty course, large event such as a conference or a project such as creation of a database.
- **Definition of Work Group.** In this Proposal, a work group is defined as a group of employees (typically five to eight members) working in the capacity of faculty assistants who share information, resources and appropriate work within allotted faculty support. Within a work group, an individual assistant is accountable for meeting the support needs of assigned faculty, although some of the work may be shared with or delegated to other members of the work group. Work groups make decisions by reaching consensus on how to prioritize, assign, and perform the work. Taking into consideration the skills, experience, and availability of group members, an assistant controls if and how work is shared, and determines how best to accomplish work.
- **One-to-one assignments.** Regardless of the extent of work sharing within a work group, each faculty will be assigned one assistant as their primary contact. This contact will manage requests for services from that faculty, either handling them directly or by arranging for the services to be provided by other members of the group or from other groups. The faculty will not be expected to ask other members of the group for help unless prearrangements are made (e.g. back up during a vacation.)
- **Continuity of Assignments.** Except where performance or other extenuating circumstances exists, there will be long-term continuity of assistant assignments to faculty, with particular attention paid to temporary changes/reductions in faculty allocation of assistant time (e.g. sabbaticals and research leaves). Assistants will remain in the work group and perform other value-added assignments for the work group or the faculty assistant program during the temporary change of faculty allocation. The intent is to maintain the ability to resume the original relationship when the temporary reduction in allocation is over.
- **Self-direction.** A central goal of the design is to include an element of self-direction, both as individual assistants and as work groups. The assistant role currently includes a significant degree of independence which many assistants enjoy, but some assistants come up against high workloads, competing requests from multiple faculty, issues with support departments and other practical limits to the independence. The design enables self-direction by:

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- Retaining the individual assistant's control over when faculty requests are shared.
- Providing peer support in the work group to prioritize requests, share work and deal with excessive workloads or unreasonable demands.
- Giving members of the work group control over how shared work will be distributed among themselves.
- Group decisions about shared work and other internal matters will be made by consensus.
- **Roles within the Work Group.** Two kinds of roles are proposed within the work group that will need further definition during implementation planning:
 - **Internal Leadership roles.** Some coordination is needed internally for group tasks such as planning and facilitating group meetings, scheduling, serving as liaison to administrators outside the group and setting up training.
 - **Advanced Skills Roles.** Some members of the work group will learn advanced skills in areas such as finance, IT, course development or events coordination. When they do, they will have a group role as liaison to the related administrative department, local expert for the group in the topic, channel for information, coordinator for training of other group members and part of a peer network of assistants across KSG.
- **Defined career paths.** Define levels of skills and opportunities for assistants to grow within the expanded scope of the assistant position.
 - **Higher expectations for skills.** Set expectations for all assistants to eventually reach skill levels that are higher than the current average level. The expectation would be supported by opportunities to receive training and to gain experience.
 - **Advanced skills.** Opportunity for work group members to learn and use advanced skills then make the skills available to the work group.
 - **Skill-based compensation.** Assistant compensation reflects increasing skills and responsibilities.
 - **Promotional Opportunities.** Identify steps for promotion out of the Faculty Assistant Program.
- **More flexible work schedules.** Effective work sharing increases the opportunity for group members to arrange more flexible work schedules. Group members would be able to arrange more flexible schedules to allow for part time positions, training opportunities, family obligations and personal preference while still meeting faculty needs. The evolution towards more flexible work schedules would occur within parameters and performance expectations set by the Faculty Assistant Program.
- **Alternate reporting structures.** The Faculty Assistant Program's reporting relationship should reflect its academic support mission. Specifically, it should report to an administrator more closely tied to the work of assistants which focuses on courses, faculty research, faculty events, the academic calendar, students, etc. instead of Human Resources.

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Key Benefits of Recommendations

Work groups would improve support to faculty by offering:

- Continuity of one-to-one relationships between assistant and faculty.
- Seamless provision of consistent quality support services to faculty because the assistant can draw on the skills and resources of other work group members.
- Ability to handle peak workloads and requests for advanced skill services.
- Backup support from the work group when the assigned assistant is not available.
- Higher work performance expectations for each job grade.
- Greater capacity for completing longer-term projects.

Work groups would improve faculty assistant morale and lead to better retention by offering:

- Better job variety and career growth.
- Career paths and promotional opportunities linked to current job descriptions for Grades 51 through 55 and to services performed for faculty.
- Opportunities to develop and use advanced skills in individual areas of interest.
- Training opportunities including peer learning and internship with administrative departments.
- Compensation that recognizes development of skills and abilities.
- Involvement in decision-making about the work at the local level on a day-to-day basis.
- Better balance of workloads among assistants.
- Reduced isolation through regular interaction within the work groups, networks of assistants with advanced skills and collaboration with administrative departments.
- Opportunity for more flexible work schedules.

Implementation and Next Steps

This proposal involves a major cultural shift in how work is perceived and performed at the KSG. The challenges are mainly trust issues and comfort levels, such as:

- Individual assistants sharing work and responsibility with other group members.
- Contending with new or changing expectations from KSG administration and peers.
- Potential concerns with peers' work performance.
- Faculty concerns about losing availability of assistants.

Implementation of the proposals will require a significant investment of time and support to assistants and their work groups. A period of time may be needed to develop readiness among faculty and assistants during which there are presentations, workshops, assessments, and addressing of underlying issues. The implementation itself should occur in planned phases or stages with features of the design introduced incrementally.