GRAND VALLEY
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PROFESSIONALS COMMITTEE

Dr. Shorty,

On behalf of the AP Committee, please find the attached memo produced by the AP Salary and Benefits Subcommittee and endorsed by the AP Executive Committee.

The memo, titled *Strategic Compensation and Career Framework: A Model for Continuous Alignment*, addresses common concerns and challenges for AP staff related to their holistic compensation and areas for consideration moving forward. We offer this memo as a collaborative contribution to ongoing work within the People, Equity, and Culture Division.

We also recognize that many of the areas addressed in the memo directly align with the ongoing People Value Proposition (PVP) work. We see this overlap as a strong sign of alignment in our priorities and ask that the challenges and opportunities identified in the memo be considered as a part of this ongoing work.

Thank you for your continued partnership. We look forward to an opportunity to dialogue with you about this topic and to being involved in the PVP work as it moves forward.

Respectfully,
The AP Executive Committee

AP Salary & Benefits Sub Committee
MEMORANDUM

To: AP Executive Committee

From: AP Salary & Benefits Sub-Committee

Subject: Strategic Compensation and Career Framework: A Model for Continuous Alignment

Date: July 24, 2026

CC: AP Salary & Benefits Sub-Committee members: Jon Dean (Chair), Chris Cirefice (Vice-Chair), Katie Perschbacher (Secretary), Rachel Charno, Holly Cole, Matthew Collver, Elizabeth Lienau, Clayton Pelon, and Meagan Treadway. HR Liaisons: Dani Kimera, Tammi King.

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Executive Summary

Grand Valley State University relies on Administrative Professional (AP) staff to sustain institutional operations, advance strategic initiatives, and maintain continuity across academic and administrative units. Recognizing the important role AP staff play in institutional success, the AP Salary and Benefits Subcommittee conducted a review of compensation structures, career progression systems, and related organizational practices affecting AP employees.

The committee's review drew upon survey feedback, institutional practices, comparative research, prior compensation analyses, and committee discussions across eight interconnected areas of the compensation ecosystem:

- Job descriptions
- Salary levels
- Cost of living adjustments
- Market adjustments
- Merit
- Promotions and career pathways
- Compression
- Equity

Rather than viewing these topics as independent concerns, the committee sought to understand how they interact within the university's broader compensation framework.

Additionally, consideration was provided to the eight employee core competencies at GVSU: empowering, well-being oriented, fostering an inclusive & equitable community, asset mindset, acts with integrity, collaborative teamwork, emotional intelligence, and innovator mentality.

Overall, the review identified a central finding: Many compensation concerns stem not from isolated policies, but from the interaction of multiple institutional systems, including job classification, salary governance, performance evaluation, advancement pathways, and communication practices.

As a result, the committee's findings emphasize structural clarity, predictable governance processes, transparent communication, and consistent implementation rather than isolated or one-time corrective actions.

Across all areas reviewed, six institutional themes consistently emerged:

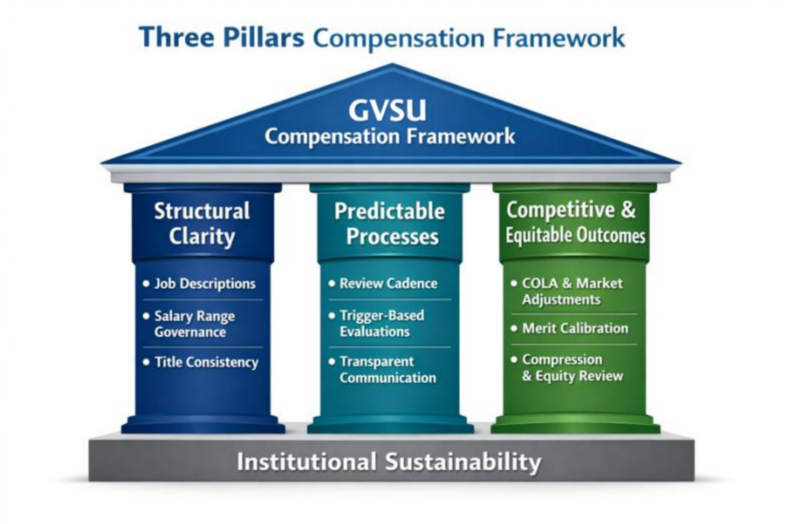
1. Accurate and current job descriptions serve as foundational infrastructure for compensation governance.
2. Transparency regarding compensation processes is closely tied to institutional trust.
3. Predictable review cycles and clearly defined trigger mechanisms support proactive decision-making.
4. Supervisor and Appointing Officer calibration significantly influences employee experience and consistency of outcomes.
5. Budget architecture and prioritization frameworks affect the effectiveness of compensation strategies.
6. Compensation systems influence recruitment, retention, succession planning, and long-term organizational sustainability.

Taken together, these themes suggest that strengthening governance clarity, transparency, review cadence, and supervisory calibration may positively affect multiple areas of the compensation ecosystem simultaneously.

This memo is offered as a collaborative contribution to ongoing institutional improvement efforts. It is intended to support senior leadership deliberation by highlighting shared institutional themes, identifying areas for further exploration, and providing supporting analysis for consideration. Detailed topic-specific findings and supporting evidence are included in the appendices.

Additionally, this memo suggests that sustainable compensation measures are most likely to emerge from clear structures and ownership, transparent processes, predictable review practices, and consistent implementation across the institution, regardless of unit or division. Strengthening these systems has the potential to support employee empowerment, well-being, inclusion, trust, collaboration, and continuous improvement while reinforcing the university's commitment to integrity and organizational effectiveness.

By approaching compensation as both a strategic and person-centered system, the university will further enhance recruitment, retention, and institutional success. This is in alignment with the eight core competencies endorsed and supported by Senior Leadership and implemented in AP employee goals annually.



Institutional Themes

While the committee examined multiple aspects of compensation and career progression, several common themes consistently emerged across all areas of review. These themes suggest that many compensation concerns are less about isolated policies and more about the interaction among institutional structures, governance practices, and communication processes. Supporting analysis and topic-specific findings are provided in the appendices.

The committee approached compensation not solely as a financial matter, but as an operational and strategic system influencing recruitment, retention, workload sustainability, and institutional effectiveness. Across all areas reviewed, a consistent pattern emerged: many compensation concerns originate upstream in structural clarity, governance processes, and institutional communication rather than downstream in isolated adjustment decisions.

The following themes represent the committee's most significant observations and are intended to inform future institutional discussion and consideration.

1. Accurate Job Descriptions as Foundational Infrastructure

Executive Observation

Nearly every compensation process examined depends on accurate and consistently maintained job descriptions. Job descriptions serve as the foundation for classification, compensation, performance evaluation, career progression, and workforce planning.

Key Observations

- Market benchmarking requires comparable role definitions.
- Salary band placement depends on clear classification.
- Merit evaluation depends on defined performance expectations.
- Promotion pathways rely on role and tier clarity.
- Compression and equity analyses require a meaningful comparison of similar work.

Leadership Considerations

When job descriptions drift from actual responsibilities or are updated inconsistently, downstream compensation decisions become more difficult to calibrate institution wide.

The committee therefore views continued investment in job description accuracy, including maintenance cadence and governance clarity, as foundational to strengthening the broader compensation ecosystem.

- Establish expectations for routine review and maintenance.
- Clarify ownership and accountability for updates.
- Ensure continued alignment between job descriptions and compensation systems.
- Provide accurate job descriptions to help establish consistent expectations regarding empowerment, collaboration, inclusion, innovation, integrity, employee well-being, emotional intelligence, and asset-based leadership across the institution.

2. Transparency and Institutional Trust

Executive Observation

Across survey feedback and committee discussions, transparency emerged as one of the strongest themes. Employees frequently expressed uncertainty regarding compensation processes, methodologies, and decision-making frameworks.

Key Observations

- Limited visibility exists regarding salary range construction and updates.
- Employees expressed uncertainty about merit distribution practices.
- Market adjustment processes are not broadly understood.
- Compression and equity review mechanisms lack visibility for many employees.

Leadership Considerations

In many cases, processes may already exist; however, limited visibility into those processes contributes to perceived inconsistency. Improved communication regarding methodology, cadence, and governance, even absent significant policy changes, may strengthen institutional trust.

- Increase communication regarding compensation methodologies.
- Clarify review processes and governance structures.
- Consider opportunities to improve visibility without reducing flexibility.

3. Predictable Review Cycles and Governance

Executive Observation

Many compensation processes appear to rely on reactive review rather than clearly defined review cycles. Predictable governance structures may improve consistency and reduce reliance on employee-initiated concerns.

Key Observations

- Job description updates often occur inconsistently.
- Salary range review cadence is not widely understood.
- Market reviews and compression analyses may occur without clearly communicated triggers.
- Equity monitoring practices are not broadly visible.

Leadership Considerations

When review occurs only in response to acute concerns, institutions may operate reactively. Predictable review cycles, supplemented by trigger-based interventions, may support proactive governance while preserving flexibility.

- Consider formal review cadences where appropriate.

- Establish trigger-based review mechanisms.
- Improve communication regarding review timelines and responsibilities.

4. Supervisor and Appointing Officer Calibration

Executive Observation

Supervisors and Appointing Officers play a significant role in translating institutional policies into employee experience. Variation in interpretation can contribute to differing experiences across divisions.

Key Observations

- Evaluation standards may be interpreted differently across units.
- Promotion and compensation practices vary in implementation.
- Employees frequently experience compensation systems through supervisory communication.

Leadership Considerations

Investing in recurring training, calibration opportunities, and shared guidance may represent one of the most effective levers for strengthening consistency without centralized decision-making authority.

- Expand calibration and training opportunities.
- Provide shared guidance and resources.
- Support consistency while maintaining decentralized decision-making authority.

5. Budget Architecture and Trade-Off Management

Executive Observation

Multiple compensation objectives appear to compete for overlapping resources. Clear prioritization frameworks may improve predictability and support more consistent decision-making.

Key Observations

- Merit, market, compression, and equity adjustments may draw from similar funding pools.
- Funding trade-offs can create variability in outcomes.
- Prioritization principles are not always visible to employees.

Leadership Considerations

Clarifying budget architecture, whether through defined prioritization rules or distinct funding categories, may enhance predictability and reduce tension among compensation objectives.

- Clarify prioritization frameworks.
- Explore opportunities for greater transparency in compensation planning.
- Evaluate whether existing funding structures support institutional goals.

6. Retention, Recruitment, and Institutional Sustainability

Executive Observation

Compensation systems influence far more than annual salary outcomes. They affect recruitment, retention, workforce continuity, succession planning, and organizational effectiveness.

Key Observations

- Compensation influences recruitment competitiveness.
- Career progression opportunities influence retention.
- Loss of experienced employees can affect institutional continuity.
- Turnover carries both financial and operational costs.

Leadership Considerations

The committee's review suggests that strengthening structural clarity may reduce turnover risk, improve morale, and support institutional effectiveness, even within fiscal constraints. Turnover costs, both financial and operational, underscore the importance of proactive compensation governance.

- Consider compensation strategy within broader workforce planning efforts.
- Align career pathway discussions with retention goals, in alignment with our Asset Mindset competencies to capitalize on the resources we have in existing personnel.
- Continue evaluating long-term sustainability impacts of compensation structures.

Strategic Considerations for Leadership

The committee's review suggests that many compensation concerns originate not from isolated policies but from the interaction among structural components of the compensation system. Strengthening governance clarity, transparency, review cadences, and calibration mechanisms may therefore have broad impact across multiple areas simultaneously.

The committee recognizes that compensation decisions must be balanced against fiscal realities, enrollment trends, institutional priorities, and long-term sustainability considerations. Any future changes should be data-informed, operationally feasible, and aligned with the university's broader strategic objectives.

1. Governance Clarity

   Several themes highlighted uncertainty regarding ownership, review cadences, and decision-making processes across compensation-related systems. Leadership may wish to consider whether formalized review cycles and clearly defined triggers would improve consistency and predictability.

2. Transparency and Communication

   Employees frequently express uncertainty regarding how compensation processes operate. Additional communication regarding methodologies, review practices, and prioritization principles may strengthen institutional trust even when resources remain constrained.

3. Supervisor and Appointing Officer Calibration

   Supervisors and Appointing Officers play a significant role in how compensation systems are experienced by employees. Expanded calibration, training, and shared guidance may support more consistent implementation across divisions.

4. Budget Architecture and Prioritization

   Merit, market, compression, and equity considerations often intersect within shared funding environments. Greater clarity regarding prioritization principles may improve predictability and support strategic resource allocation.

5. Data Monitoring and Reporting

   Periodic review of compensation trends may help identify emerging issues before they become systemic concerns. Leadership may wish to explore opportunities for enhanced monitoring, reporting, and analysis.

6. Career Pathway Development

   The review identified recurring questions regarding advancement opportunities and professional growth. Further exploration of career pathways and advancement frameworks may support recruitment, retention, and workforce sustainability.

Appendix A: Job Descriptions

Background and Context

Accurate and consistently maintained job descriptions serve as the foundational infrastructure of an effective compensation system. Job descriptions define institutional expectations, establish role clarity, support equitable compensation decisions, and enable meaningful evaluation of workload, performance, and career progression.

Across the committee's review, job descriptions emerged as an upstream factor influencing nearly every compensation concern examined. When roles evolve without corresponding updates to job descriptions, downstream effects may include compensation misalignment, inconsistent workload expectations, unclear promotional pathways, and actual or perceived inequities across divisions.

While Grand Valley State University maintains established job description practices and Human Resources is currently conducting a baseline review of AP job descriptions, the committee found that uncertainty regarding maintenance cadence, accountability, and review triggers contributes to variability in how roles are defined and supported institutionally.

Key Observations

<u>Role Evolution and Workload Drift</u>

Survey feedback and committee discussion consistently indicated that AP employees frequently assume additional responsibilities without formal updates to job descriptions or associated compensation review. Examples described included:

- Expansion of duties resulting from new institutional initiatives.
- Reassignment of responsibilities following vacancies or turnover.
- Operational process changes requiring new competencies.
- Increased workload associated with enrollment growth or program expansion.

While such role evolution reflects institutional adaptability, the absence of systemic review mechanisms can create misalignment between documented responsibilities and actual work performed.

Variability in Review Practices

The committee identified uncertainty regarding how and when job descriptions should be revisited. Questions raised across working groups included:

- What changes should trigger a job description review?
- When does a change in duties warrant compensation evaluation?
- Who holds responsibility for initiating review: employee, supervisor, Appointing Officer (AO), or Human Resources?

In practice, responses appear to vary across divisions. Appointing Officers may interpret or prioritize job description updates differently based on local budget pressures, leadership transitions, or organizational culture. This variability contributes to inconsistent employee experiences and complicates institution-wide comparison of roles.

Organizational Implications

The committee observed that job description clarity directly affects multiple institutional functions:

- Salary level determination, which depends on accurate role definitions.
- Market benchmarking, which requires comparable role descriptions.
- Merit evaluation, which relies on clearly defined expectations.
- Compression and equity analysis, which depend on comparing similar work across units.

In this way, job descriptions function not merely as administrative documents but as essential institutional infrastructure supporting compensation governance.

Emerging Operational Considerations

Several operational themes surfaced during review:

- Leadership turnover can disrupt continuity in job description maintenance.
- Modes of work (in-person, hybrid, remote) are not consistently documented, creating misalignment between expectations and recruitment practices.
- Temporary or acting assignments are sometimes absorbed into ongoing roles without clear institutional guidance regarding compensation or duration.

These patterns suggest the need for greater clarity around institutional processes rather than individual corrective actions.

Potential Considerations

1. Establish Predictable Review Cadence

Consider implementing a defined review structure combining:

- Periodic review cycles (e.g., annual or multi-year), and
- Trigger-based reviews activated by substantive role change, supervisory responsibility shifts, or organizational restructuring.

A predictable cadence may reduce reliance on ad hoc updates and promote consistency across divisions.

2. Clarify Governance and Accountability

Institutional guidance could more clearly articulate:

- Who initiates job description review,
- How employees may request evaluation, and
- How supervisors and AOs are expected to respond.

Transparent processes may help ensure that role changes are addressed proactively rather than reactively.

3. Standardized Modes of Work

Including standardized language regarding in-office, hybrid, or remote work expectations within job descriptions and posting could improve alignment among recruitment practice, employee expectations, and operational planning.

4. Provide Structured Guidance for Acting or Overload Assignments

The committee discussed opportunities to clarify institutional expectations for temporary role expansions, including:

- Duration parameters,
- Evaluation checkpoints, and
- Potential compensation approaches when duties exceed the original role scope.

Such guidance may support both operational flexibility and equitable workload management.

5. Strengthened Alignment of Compensation Systems

Because job descriptions underpin salary levels, market analysis, promotion pathways, and equity review, continued coordination between HR and institutional leadership regarding the ongoing AP job description baseline update will be essential. Clarifying timelines, scope, and long-term maintenance expectations may help ensure that improvements realized through the current update remain sustainable.

Appendix B: Salary Levels

Background and Context

Salary levels and pay ranges translate institutional role definitions into a structured compensation framework. When functioning effectively, salary ranges support consistency, transparency, and predictability across hiring, retention, and career progression decisions.

Throughout the committee's review, salary levels emerged as a central structural issue closely connected to many concerns raised by AP employees. While the university maintains established pay ranges for AP positions, limited visibility into how ranges are constructed, updated, and applied has contributed to perceptions of inconsistency and uncertainty regarding compensation pathways.

Because salary ranges depend directly on accurate job descriptions, challenges identified in Appendix A carry forward into compensation outcomes. When role expectations evolve more rapidly than range maintenance or classification review, salary structures may no longer reflect institutional needs or external labor market conditions.

Key Observations

<u>Perceptions of Market Misalignment</u>

Survey responses reflected broad concern that salaries are not consistently competitive with peer institutions, regional employers, or positions offering remote or hybrid work flexibility. Several role families, particularly advising and specialized professional positions, were identified as difficult to recruit or retain under current salary conditions.

While individual compensation outcomes vary, the committee noted that concerns were more frequently associated with uncertainty about how salaries relate to established pay ranges than with specific pay comparisons.

<u>Dependence on Job Description Accuracy</u>

The effectiveness of salary ranges depends heavily on accurate, current, and consistently applied job descriptions. Without shared role definitions, it becomes difficult to:

- Determine appropriate range placement,
- Compare similar roles across divisions,
- Evaluate compression or equity concerns, and
- Interpret market benchmarking data.

This reinforces the importance of continued coordination between job description maintenance and salary range governance.

Governance and Maintenance Questions

Across discussions, several recurring institutional questions emerged:

- How frequently are salary ranges reviewed or recalibrated?
- What data sources inform range development and updates?
- How are emerging labor market pressures incorporated?
- What governance processes guide placement decisions within a range?

The committee did not seek to prescribe specific methodologies but identified a general lack of visibility into these processes among AP employees and, in some cases, supervisory leadership.

Title and Level Consistency

The committee also identified variability in how titles and levels are interpreted across divisions. Examples discussed included distinctions between roles such as:

- Manager positions focused on personnel supervision versus process or project oversight,
- Director and Senior Director designations, and/or
- Application of "Senior" titles across functional areas.

Inconsistent title usage can unintentionally obscure career pathways, complicate market comparison, and create challenges in communicating institutional expectations regarding advancement.

Band Cap and Placement Considerations

Questions were also raised regarding how compensation operates at or near salary range maximums, including:

- Whether merit increases are converted to base salary or lump-sum adjustments,
- How internal candidates are placed relative to external hires, and

- How prior experience, certifications, or specialized expertise are weighed during placement decisions.

These considerations highlight the need for shared institutional understanding of range application rather than changes to individual decisions.

Potential Considerations

1. Clarify Salary Range Governance and Update Cadence

Providing greater transparency regarding how salary ranges are constructed and maintained may improve institutional understanding and trust. Potential areas for clarification include review frequency and update triggers, data sources informing adjustments, and institutional roles involved in decision-making processes.

Predictable review cycles may help ensure salary ranges remain aligned with evolving institutional and labor market conditions.

2. Strengthened Alignment Between Job Description and Salary Levels

As job descriptions are updated through the ongoing HR baseline review, continued coordination between classification updates and salary range evaluation may help ensure alignment between role expectations and compensation structures.

3. Promote Consistency in Title and Level Application

Clear institutional guidance distinguishing titles and classification levels may support:

- Clearer career progression pathways,
- Improved comparability across divisions, and
- Stronger alignment between internal classification practices and external benchmarking.

4. Increase Transparency Around Range Placement and Advancement

Providing employees and supervisors with clearer information may improve understanding of how compensation decisions are made without limiting institutional flexibility. Areas for clarification could include salary range minimums and maximums, placement considerations within ranges, and typical progression expectations.

5. Support Recruitment and Retention Planning

Improved shared understanding of salary range governance may assist Appointing Officers and hiring managers in developing recruitment strategies, anticipating market pressures, and communicating compensation expectations more effectively to candidates and current employees.

Appendix C: Cost of Living

Background and Context

Salary ranges define how roles are valued institutionally. However, maintaining the real value of compensation over time requires consideration of broader economic conditions. When inflation and broader household costs increase faster than salary adjustments, employees may experience erosion of purchasing power, even when merit increases are provided.

Currently, AP staff compensation adjustments are primarily structured through merit-based increases. While merit recognizes individual performance, it does not function as a systemic mechanism for maintaining purchasing power across the workforce.

The absence of a clearly defined cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) framework creates uncertainty regarding how the university responds to macroeconomic shifts affecting employees across salary levels.

Key Observations

Purchasing Power Pressures

Survey responses consistently referenced rising housing costs in Allendale and Grand Rapids, general inflationary pressures, and increased living expenses across multiple categories. While the committee did not conduct independent economic modeling, publicly available regional indicators suggest that cost increases have outpaced salary growth in many sectors over the past several years.

Employees expressed concern that merit-based adjustments alone may not reliably offset these pressures, particularly when merit pools are limited or unevenly distributed across divisions.

Conflation of Adjustment Mechanisms

The committee observed that merit increases are often expected to serve multiple purposes simultaneously:

- Reward individual performance,
- Maintain purchasing power,
- Address market competitiveness, and

- Correct compression or equity concerns.

When one mechanism attempts to address multiple institutional objectives, clarity may diminish. Employees may perceive merit outcomes as inconsistent or inequitable when, in practice, the system is attempting to manage competing priorities within a single pool of funds.

Distinguishing cost-of-living adjustments from other compensation mechanisms could improve transparency and reduce confusion regarding the purpose of each adjustment type.

Institutional Predictability

Several committee discussions highlighted the value of predictability in compensation systems. When employees understand how purchasing power is maintained, even within defined caps or thresholds, institutional trust may improve regardless of specific annual outcomes.

Currently, it is not widely understood how the university evaluates or models inflationary impacts relative to AP compensation structures. This lack of visibility contributes to uncertainty regarding the institution's long-term approach to maintaining purchasing power.

Potential Considerations

1. Separate Cost-of-Living Adjustments from Merit Increases

Formally distinguishing cost-of-living adjustments (COLA) from performance-based merit increases could improve transparency regarding the purpose and intent of compensation adjustments. Merit increases would primarily recognize individual performance and contribution, while cost-of-living adjustments would serve as a mechanism for addressing changes in purchasing power resulting from inflation and broader economic conditions.

Such separation would not necessarily require significant new financial investment but could provide greater clarity regarding the objectives of each adjustment mechanism and reduce confusion when compensation decisions are communicated to employees.

2. Establish Transparent Benchmarking Inputs

If a COLA mechanism were explored, potential data sources could include:

- Bureau of Labor Statistics CPI (Midwest)

- Higher education salary movement indices (e.g., CUPA-HR)
- Regional economic indicators relevant to Michigan

Publishing the methodology, even if capped or blended, would support institutional transparency.

3. Explore Threshold or Tiered Models

The committee discussed potential models in which full COLA would apply below a defined salary threshold and partial adjustments would apply above that threshold.

Such models would require further modeling and coordination with Salary Level governance to ensure alignment with bend structures.

4. Consider Phased or Catch-Up Approaches

When purchasing power erosion has accumulated over multiple years institutions sometimes explore phased multi-year adjustments or one-time corrective payments.

The committee does not recommend a specific approach but suggests that scenario modeling could clarify feasibility and impact.

5. Improve Communication Regarding Compensation Strategy

Even absent structural change, providing clearer institutional communication about how inflationary pressures are considered in compensation planning may strengthen trust and reduce misinterpretation of merit outcomes.

Appendix D: Market Adjustments

Background and Context

While cost-of-living considerations address broad economic pressures affecting purchasing power, market adjustments serve a different institutional purpose: ensuring that compensation for specific roles remains competitive within relevant labor markets.

AP positions operate within diverse labor ecosystems. Some roles compete primarily with peer higher education institutions; others compete with regional public-sector employers, private industry, or remote labor markets. When compensation for specific roles falls significantly outside prevailing market benchmarks, institutions may experience recruitment delays, increased turnover, or reliance on vacancy savings to stabilize staffing.

Currently, the cadence, methodology, and governance framework for market adjustment evaluations are not widely understood across divisions. This lack of visibility contributes to uncertainty regarding how and when market competitiveness is assessed or addressed.

Key Observations

Recruitment and Retention Signals

Survey responses and committee discussions identified several role categories such as advising, specialized technical fields, and operational leadership positions, where recruitment challenges or retention concerns have emerged. Employees frequently referenced salary comparisons with:

- Regional community colleges.
- Local municipalities.
- Private-sector employers.
- Remote employment opportunities.

While market competitiveness naturally varies across role families, the perception that market analysis occurs inconsistently may affect employee confidence in institutional responsiveness.

Governance and Cadence Questions

The committee identified several recurring questions regarding how market competitiveness is evaluated:

- What benchmark sources are used to assess AP market alignment?
- How are peer comparison groups selected?
- How frequently are market analyses conducted?
- What triggers prompt review outside a regular cycle?
- What guidance is provided to Appointing Officers when market pressures are identified?

Absent shared visibility into these processes, divisions may rely on informal approaches or vacancy-driven adjustments rather than structured review cycles.

Budget Architecture Considerations

Market adjustments intersect directly with broader compensation funding considerations. In many institutions, merit, compression, equity, and market adjustments draw from a common annual pool of resources. When multiple priorities compete within a single allocation, clarity regarding prioritization becomes increasingly important.

The committee observed that without explicit governance guidance:

- Market pressures may be addressed unevenly,
- Merit funding may be redirected toward structural corrections, and
- Employees may perceive inconsistencies in compensation outcomes.

Understanding how market adjustments are funded and prioritized relative to other compensation mechanisms is therefore central to institutional transparency.

Potential Considerations

1. Clarify Market Benchmarking Framework

Providing greater transparency regarding benchmark data sources, peer-set selection methodology, and an update cadence could improve shared understanding of how competitiveness is evaluated. Even high-level communication about methodology may strengthen institutional trust without limiting administrative flexibility.

2. Establish Predictable Review Cadence and Trigger Mechanisms

Institutions often balance regular review cycles with trigger-based evaluations prompted by significant turnover, classification changes, or emerging labor shortages.

Clarifying whether such cadence and trigger mechanisms exist, and how they operate, may support consistent application across divisions.

3. Provide Structured Guidance for Appointing Officers

Standardized guidance for interpreting market data and documenting adjustment requests may reduce variability across divisions, improve consistency in decision-making, and support data-informed budget planning. Supervisor and AO training could further enhance calibration and reduce reliance on informal negotiation processes.

4. Clarify Funding Architecture and Prioritization Rules

If market adjustments share funding pools with merit, compression, or equity corrections, institutional guidance clarifying prioritization principles may improve predictability.

Alternatively, exploring whether distinct funding categories are feasible could reduce internal trade-offs and preserve the intended purpose of each mechanism.

5. Improve Communication Regarding Competitiveness Strategy

As with COLA considerations, institutional communication regarding how and when market competitiveness is assessed may help mitigate perceptions if inaction, even when fiscal constraints limit immediate adjustments.

Appendix E: Merit

Background and Context

Merit increases represent the primary mechanism through which GVSU recognizes individual performance and contribution among AP staff. When functioning effectively, merit systems reinforce institutional priorities, encourage professional growth, and reward exceptional performance.

At GVSU, the merit process is challenged by the expectation that merit increases address multiple institutional objectives simultaneously, including performance recognition, cost-of-living pressures, market competitiveness, and compensation correction. This convergence can create uncertainty regarding the purpose of merit increases and contribute to varied employee experiences across divisions.

Ensuring that merit functions as a clear and credible performance-based mechanism requires alignment among evaluation practices, compensation processes, and institutional communication.

Key Observations

Appreciation for Merit as a Concept

Survey responses reflected broad appreciation for merit increases as a means of recognizing employee contributions. Employees value systems that differentiate performance and provide opportunities for compensation growth based on achievement.

At the same time, respondents frequently expressed uncertainty regarding how merit determinations are made and how evaluation outcomes translate into compensation adjustments.

Variability in Evaluation Practices

The committee observed that performance evaluation practices vary considerably across divisions. Areas of uncertainty cited include:

- Definitions of performance ratings such as "Succeeding" versus "Exceeding"
- Expectations for goal setting and what constitutes work "above and beyond" core responsibilities
- Differences in evaluation calibration among supervisors and Appointing Officers

This variability appears to reflect not inconsistency in intent, but rather the absence of shared institutional calibration mechanisms supporting supervisors in applying evaluation frameworks consistently.

Competing Demands Placed on Merit

Across several areas of the committee's review, merit emerged as a mechanism expected to address multiple compensation pressures simultaneously, including:

- Performance recognition
- Cost-of-living pressures
- Market competitiveness concerns
- Compression correction
- Equity considerations

When merit funding serves multiple purposes, employees may perceive outcomes as unpredictable or inequitable even when supervisors are applying existing processes appropriately and consistently.

Clarifying the intended role of merit within the broader compensation framework may improve understanding and help distinguish performance-based recognition from other compensation objectives.

Institutional Communication and Transparency

The committee noted that many employees lack visibility into how merit pools are established, distributed, or calibrated institutionally. Limited understanding of the connection between performance ratings and compensation outcomes can contribute to misinterpretation of merit decisions.

Committee discussions also highlighted questions regarding differences in merit structures across employee groups. Participants noted that faculty and AP employees operate under different evaluation frameworks, performance rating scales, and merit allocation models. While these systems serve distinct employee populations and institutional purposes, limited understanding of their differences may contribute to perceptions of inconsistency or inequity. Greater transparency regarding the rationale, objectives, and design of each system may support broader institutional understanding.

Strengthening communication regarding evaluation expectations, compensation linkage, and institutional compensation philosophy may enhance employee confidence in the process.

Potential Considerations

1. Clarify Performance Rating Definitions and Expectations

Providing shared institutional guidance clarifying distinctions among performance ratings, including expectations for "Succeeding," "Exceeding," and related categories, may support greater consistency across divisions.

This clarification could include examples of goal-setting practices distinguishing core responsibilities from stretch contributions.

2. Expand Supervisor and Appointing Office Calibration Support

Ongoing training and calibration opportunities for supervisors and Appointing Offices could help ensure more consistent interpretation of performance standards and compensation decisions.

Such support would reinforce fairness while maintaining decentralized evaluation authority.

3. Reinforce Merit as a Performance-Based Mechanism

Separating merit conceptually from cost-of-living, market, and compression adjustments may allow merit increases to more clearly reflect performance recognition rather than structural compensation correction.

Clarifying this distinction may improve both employee understanding and institutional alignment.

4. Consider Follow-Up Assessment of Merit Practices

The committee discussed the potential value of a future assessment, combining quantitative and qualitative feedback, to evaluate how well merit processes are understood following implementation of any communication of calibration improvements.

5. Improve Transparency Around Merit Processes

Providing clearer institutional communication regarding how merit pools are established, how evaluation outcomes inform compensation decisions, and how merit interacts with other adjustment mechanisms may strengthen institutional trust even when fiscal constraints limit award size.

Appendix F: Promotions

Background and Context

While merit increases recognize performance within existing roles, long-term employee engagement and institutional retention also depend on clearly defined opportunities for advancement and consistency across divisions and units. Promotions and career pathways provide mechanisms through which employees can expand responsibility, increase compensation, and contribute at higher levels without necessarily leaving the institution.

Throughout the committee's review, the absence of clearly articulated and consistently applied promotion pathways emerged as a significant concern among AP staff. Employees frequently expressed uncertainty regarding how advancement occurs, what criteria are used to determine eligibility, and whether opportunities for growth are equitably accessible across divisions.

In the absence of structured career pathways, advancement may depend heavily on vacancy occurrence or informal negotiation, limiting predictability and potentially increasing turnover risk. As a result, discussions regarding promotions frequently intersected with broader conversations about retention, workforce sustainability, and institutional effectiveness.

Key Observations

<u>Lack of Clear Advancement Pathways</u>

Survey responses and committee discussions frequently referenced uncertainty regarding how AP employees advance within the institution. Employees expressed questions about:

- What constitutes promotion versus role expansion,
- How advancement opportunities are identified,
- What qualifications or experiences support progression, and
- Whether opportunities are applied consistently across divisions.

While advancement opportunities exist throughout the institution, employees often report limited visibility into how those opportunities emerge or how they might prepare for future progression.

Inconsistent Use of Job Tiers and Advancement Structures

The committee observed variation in how promotional growth is structured across divisions and role families. In some areas, employees may have access to clearly differentiated position levels or progression pathways, while in others advancement may depend primarily on vacancy-driven opportunities.

This variability can create differing employee experiences and may contribute to perceptions that advancement opportunities are unevenly distributed.

Questions also emerged regarding the role of position classifications, title structures, and salary levels in supporting long-term career growth.

Institutional Investment and Retention

Committee discussions highlighted the relationship between advancement opportunities and employee retention. Employees who perceive opportunities for professional growth may be more likely to remain engaged and invested in the institution over time.

Conversely, when advancement opportunities appear limited or unclear, employees may seek growth opportunities outside the university even when they remain committed to the institution's mission.

The committee noted that career development and retention should not be viewed as separate conversations. Opportunities for advancement, professional growth, and skill development contribute directly to workforce sustainability and institutional continuity.

Governance and Process Ambiguity

Questions also emerged regarding how promotional decisions are initiated and evaluated. Areas of uncertainty included:

- Criteria used to support promotion requests,
- Roles and responsibilities in the review process,

- Relationship between promotion and compensation adjustments, and
- Documentation requirements supporting advancement decisions.

While promotion decisions appropriately involve local leadership discretion, the absence of broadly understood institutional guidance may contribute to differing interpretations and employee experiences.

Potential Considerations

1. Clarify and Document Promotion Pathways

Providing clear institutional guidance regarding promotion versus reclassification, eligibility criteria, documentation requirements, and compensation implications could improve transparency and reduce uncertainty across divisions.

2. Explore Structured Job Family or Tier Frameworks

Institutions such as Purdue and Michigan Tech utilize job family structures and tiered progression models that define advancement criteria within functional areas. Exploring whether a comparable framework could be adapted at GVSU may:

- Clarify growth expectations,
- Reduce reliance on vacancy-based advancement, and
- Support succession planning.

Any exploration would require careful consideration of governance, feasibility, and equity implications.

3. Define Advancement Criteria Beyond Management Tracks

For specialized or technical roles, institutions may consider advancement frameworks recognizing:

- Professional certifications,
- Demonstrated subject-matter expertise,
- Portfolio development,
- Cross-functional leadership,
- Mentoring contributions, or
- Institutional service.

Such pathways may reduce the structural pressure to equate advancement solely with supervisory responsibility.

4. Aligning Career Pathways with Professional Development Investments

Strengthening alignment between institutional development programs (e.g., leadership programs, credential completion, advanced degrees) and promotional eligibility criteria may enhance return on institutional investment and support retention.

5. Improve Transparency Around Salary Implications of Promotion

Clear communication regarding how salary adjustments accompany promotional movement, including integration with salary bands and merit, may reduce confusion and strengthen planning for both employees and supervisors.

6. Conduct Process Mapping and Data Analysis

The committee identified the need for further clarity regarding historical promotion rates across divisions, associated salary adjustments, and governance approval processes.

Understanding current patterns would support evidence-based decision-making regarding potential reforms.

Appendix G: Compression

Background and Context

Salary compression occurs when compensation differences between employees in similar roles narrow in ways that do not reflect differences in experience, tenure, responsibility, or performance. Compression may emerge gradually as labor markets shift, hiring markets fluctuate, salary structures evolve, or compensation adjustments are applied unevenly over time.

Throughout the committee's review, compression emerged not as an isolated concern but as a recurring structural challenge. Discussions frequently intersected with broader questions regarding market competitiveness, salary progression, compensation governance, and employee retention.

Absent consistent monitoring, shared definitions, and clearly understood review processes, compression may contribute to diminished morale, retention risk, and reduced confidence in compensation systems.

Key Observations

Tenure-Based Compression Concerns

Survey responses and committee discussions frequently referenced concerns regarding salary differences between long-tenured employees and newly hired colleagues performing similar work. Employees expressed concern that:

- Market-driven hiring adjustments may outpace compensation growth for existing employees,
- Years of institutional experience are not always reflected in compensation outcomes, and
- Salary progression over time may not keep pace with changes in labor market conditions.

These concerns were often framed less as objections to competitive hiring practices and more as questions regarding how existing employees are supported when market pressures affect compensation structures.

<u>Interaction with Market Adjustments</u>

The committee observed that compression concerns frequently arise alongside efforts to maintain market competitiveness.

When institutions adjust salaries to attract qualified candidates in competitive labor markets, compensation gaps between incumbent and newly hired employees may narrow.

Without clear communication or complementary review mechanisms, employees may perceive these adjustments as inconsistent or inequitable.

As a result, compression and market competitiveness are often interconnected considerations rather than independent compensation issues.

<u>Budget Architecture Constraints</u>

Committee discussions highlighted the reality that compensation resources are finite and that multiple priorities frequently compete for available funding.

Compression concerns may intersect with:

- Merit increases,
- Market adjustments,
- Equity reviews, and
- Cost-of-living considerations.

When institutions attempt to address multiple compensation objectives within a shared funding environment, trade-offs may become necessary. Employees may not always have visibility into how these decisions are prioritized.

Institutional Impact

Employees frequently associate compression concerns with retention, morale, and perceptions of organizational value.

Whether actual or perceived, compression may influence employee engagement and long-term commitment to the institution. The committee therefore viewed compression not solely as a compensation issue, but also as a workforce sustainability consideration.

Potential Considerations

1. Clarifying Definitions and Institutional Approach

Providing formal definitions that distinguish compression, market misalignment, and equity disparities would support clearer identification of underlying concerns and more targeted remediation strategies.

2. Establish Review Cadence and Trigger Mechanisms

Periodic compression reviews, trigger-based reviews following significant market adjustments, and reviews following minimum wage increases that indirectly affect salary hierarchies could support more proactive governance of compression concerns.

A defined cadence could reduce reliance on employee-initiated concerns and enhance proactive governance.

3. Explore Dedicated Funding Mechanisms

If feasible, distinguishing compression funding from merit allocations may reduce trade-offs between performance recognition and structural correction. Even where dedicated pools are not fiscally viable, clarifying prioritization rules within shared pools may improve transparency.

4. Improve Market Data Transparency

Providing greater visibility into benchmark data sources and how they inform salary corrections may strengthen understanding of how compression intersects with market competitiveness.

5. Develop Monitoring and Reporting Tools

Exploring the feasibility of de-identified dashboards that track year-over-year salary changes by division, employee progression within salary ranges, and compression indicators relative to tenure or responsibility could support more systematic monitoring while preserving confidentiality.

Appendix H: Equity

Background and Context

Equity considerations emerged across every area examined by the committee. Rather than representing a standalone compensation issue, equity reflects how consistently institutional structures, policies, and decision-making processes operate across divisions, roles, and employee populations.

When compensation systems function predictably, supported by accurate job descriptions, transparent salary structures, calibrated evaluation practices, and defined review mechanisms, equitable outcomes are more likely to occur. Conversely, when processes vary across organizational units, employees may experience outcomes that appear inconsistent even when decisions are made in good faith.

The committee therefore approached equity as an institutional systems question: How effectively do existing compensation practices produce consistent and fair outcomes across the university?

Key Observations

Perceived Variability Across Divisions

Survey responses frequently referenced concerns that compensation practices operate in "silos" across divisions. Employees noted uncertainty regarding:

- Consistency of salary placement practices,
- Interpretation of evaluation standards,
- Access to advancement opportunities, and
- Responsiveness to compensation concerns.

These perceptions often reflect structural variability rather than individual decision-making. Decentralized administrative models provide flexibility but may also produce differing employee experiences when institutional guidance is interpreted unevenly.

Definitional Ambiguity

Committee discussions highlighted the importance of distinguishing among several related but distinct concepts:

- Equity – fairness and consistency of processes and outcomes.
- Compression – salary convergence over time.
- Market Misalignment – divergence from external labor benchmarks.

Without shared institutional definitions, concerns raised under the banner of "equity" may actually stem from different causes requiring different solutions.

Existing Institutional Work

The committee recognizes that equity-related efforts occur across multiple campus entities, including inclusion and equity initiatives, climate assessment work, and affinity group engagement. Aligning compensation discussions with these ongoing efforts may strengthen institutional coherence and avoid duplication of work.

The committee's findings suggest that compensation equity should be understood as one component within a broader institutional ecosystem addressing employee experience, inclusion, and organizational effectiveness.

Access and Psychological Safety Considerations

Employees may not always feel comfortable raising compensation concerns through supervisory channels, particularly when issues involve evaluation practices or organizational hierarchy.

Clear communication regarding available reporting pathways, including Human Resources, Ombuds services, and institutional support resources, may improve access and confidence in existing systems.

Role of Supervisors and Appointing Officers

Across multiple sections of this memo, supervisor and Appointing Officer practices emerged as key equity levers. Differences in training, onboarding, and experience can influence how policies are interpreted and applied locally.

Supporting supervisors through consistent training and calibration processes may therefore represent one of the most impactful institutional strategies for advancing equitable outcomes.

Institutional Perspective

Equity outcomes are shaped less by individual decisions than by the consistency of institutional systems. Strengthening clarity, transparency, and governance across compensation processes may therefore represent a sustainable approach to advancing equity while maintaining organizational flexibility.

Potential Considerations

1. Conduct or Communicate Regular Pay Equity Analysis

Where feasible, institutions may consider periodic pay equity analyses examining compensation trends across divisions, roles, and relevant demographic dimensions using de-identified aggregate data.

Even when analyses already occur, improved communication regarding methodology and findings may strengthen transparency and trust.

2. Establish Cross-Functional Coordination

Given the overlap between compensation, climate, and inclusion initiatives, the committee discussed the potential value of coordinated collaboration among groups such as:

- The AP Salary and Benefits Subcommittee,
- Faculty Staff Associations,
- Employee Ombuds, and
- Other affinity or governance bodies.

Coordination may improve alignment while respecting existing governance structures.

3. Clarify Reporting and Support Pathways

Providing clear, employee-facing guidance outlining where and how concerns related to compensation fairness can be raised may increase accessibility and psychological safety.

This includes ensuring employees understand options available when they are uncomfortable approaching supervisory channels directly.

4. Strengthening Supervisor Training as an Equity Strategy

Formal, recurring training that supports supervisors and Appointing Officers in performance evaluation, compensation decision-making, bias mitigation, and policy interpretation may promote more consistent outcomes across decentralized units.

5. Address Access to Development Opportunities

The committee also noted that participation in leadership development programs or professional growth opportunities may vary depending on workload constraints or release-time availability. Ensuring equitable access to development opportunities may support advancement pathways and reinforce institutional investment in employee growth.