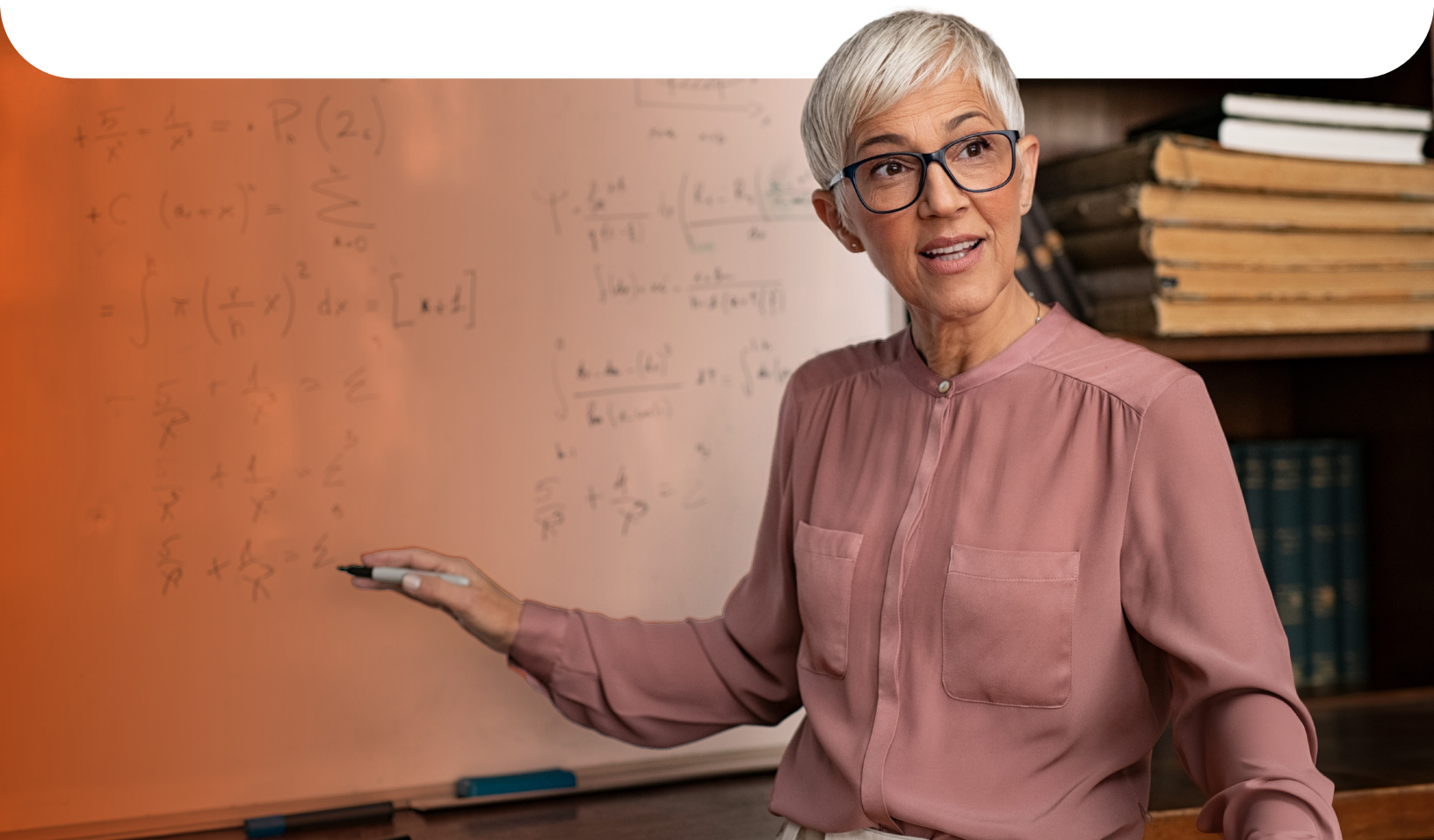


The HR Guide to Higher Education Leave and Accommodations Management

A Look at Current Challenges and How to Modernize for Success



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Introduction

Before COVID and the rise of online education, most university faculty and administrative staff lived on or near campus. Now, student needs are evolving, and technology keeps dramatically changing the way we work and learn.

Every year, colleges and universities are remotely employing professors, adjunct professors, specialty professors, and a range of administrative staff, including IT, HR, communications, and more – all who live spread across multiple states.



Instead of leave teams being able to manage leave laws for just one state, it's easily a dozen or more. Today, there are more than 500 federal, state, and local leave laws – with more getting passed every year. These laws are not simply “one and done” either. Laws continue to evolve as amendments, protections, programs, and details are added and changed.

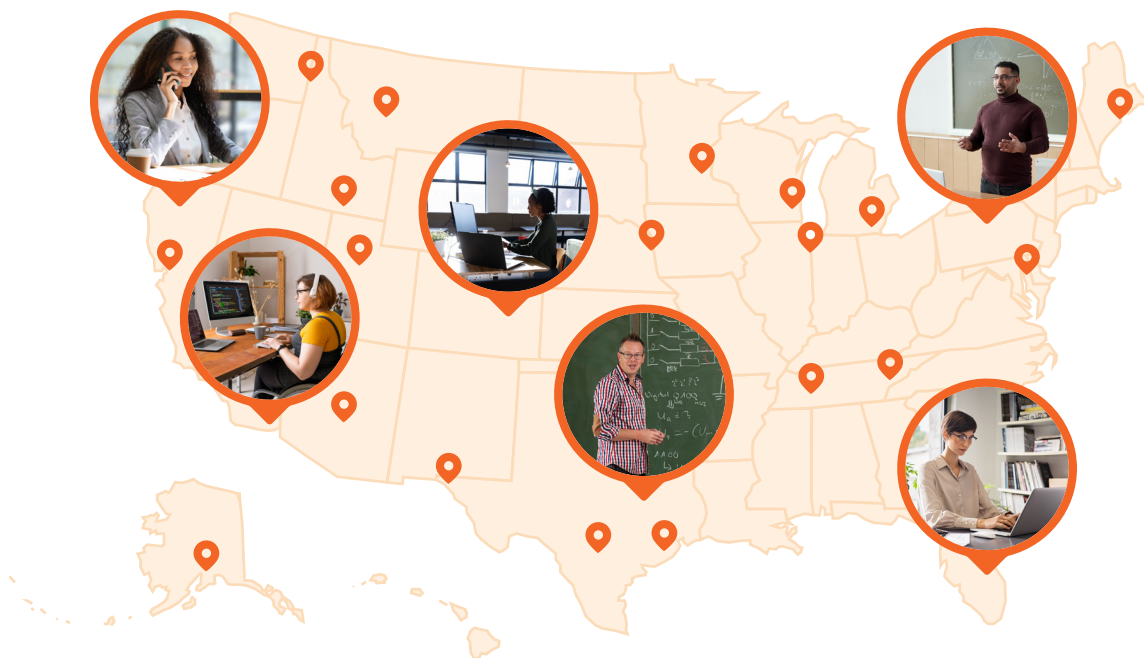
In this guide, we'll look at the challenges HR teams in higher education are facing and the impact they have. We will also cover ways to meet these challenges by modernizing your leave and accommodations program with the right strategies, processes, and technology.

Moving Towards a Distributed Workforce

In 2021, about 60% of all postsecondary degree seekers in the U.S. took at least some online classes, adding up to nearly 8.5 million U.S. students taking online classes at public higher education institutions that year.¹ Since then, that number has only grown, and it is changing the higher education workforce in significant ways.

More online classes means hiring more remote instructors – educators who can live anywhere and still effectively teach their classes. Some university administration positions can also be done remotely, relieving the burden and cost of providing office space on campuses. However, these remote workforces are adding a lot of complexity for leave managers in higher education.

One example is Michigan State University's rapid rise in remote workers. In just a few short years, HR Manager Tony Lemke, **went from managing leave requests for employees in only three states to 43.**



“Our workforce now has a little over 400 employees in 43 different states. For a team of five like ours, it’s nearly impossible to try to keep up with the various changes and laws,” said Lemke.

Sometimes managing leave in just one state can become a major challenge if that state has complex or vaguely worded laws. KaLee Quanz, Employee Benefits Specialist at Gonzaga University, struggled to manage Washington state’s leave laws when people started applying for benefits in 2020.

“In Washington State, the laws have been difficult to manage because the state didn’t put in a lot of direction,” said Quanz.

With more leave and accommodations laws getting passed every day, compliance can become a major risk, and the resulting lawsuits can be costly.

According to the U.S. Department of Labor, **the average cost to defend a lawsuit is \$78,000 – regardless of if you win or lose.** The damages can go much higher if you are found to be at fault.

In this challenging environment, technology like AbsenceSoft can help universities stay compliant. HR managers like Quanz and Lemke are now using a built-in compliance engine that calculates employee eligibility for different leave entitlements automatically. They don’t have to become experts in more than 190 leave and accommodations laws when they can rely on software that has already been updated by AbsenceSoft’s in-house compliance team.

Reason for Case

| | |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Bonding | <input type="checkbox"/> Care for Injured Servicemember |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Care of Child during Public Health Emergency | <input type="checkbox"/> Adoption/Foster Care |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Military | <input type="checkbox"/> Child Care Provider or School Emergency |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Employee Health Condition | <input type="checkbox"/> Family Health Condition |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Pregnancy/Maternity | <input type="checkbox"/> Voting Leave |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Other | <input type="checkbox"/> COVID 19 |

Expected Case Dates
06/03/2024 to 08/19/2024

Calculate Eligibility

| Policy | Eligible |
|---|----------|
| Family Medical Leave Act | Yes |
| Oregon Family Leave-Pregnancy/Maternity | Yes |
| Oregon Paid Leave | Yes |
| Oregon Paid Leave - Job Protection | Yes |
| Oregon Family Leave | Yes |
| ABC Company Parental Leave | Yes |

Rising Leave and Accommodations Requests

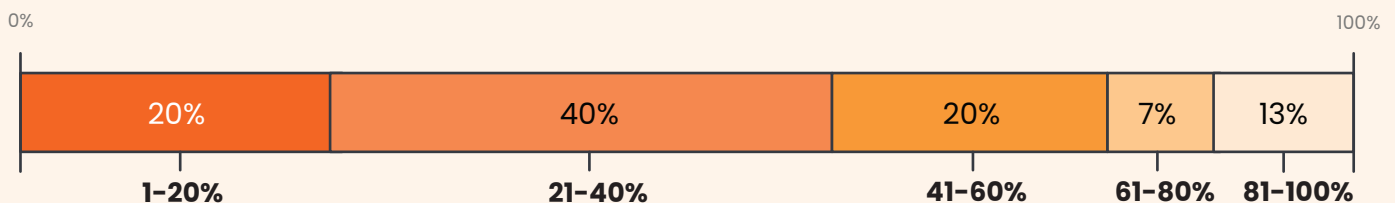
Requests for both leave and workplace accommodations are on the rise, due in part to new laws like the Pregnant Worker's Fairness Act (PWFA) taking effect. A forecast report by AbsenceSoft found that a majority of HR teams in higher education reported an increase in both leave and accommodations requests during the past year. Of those that reported increases, more than 75% reported handling 20% or more cases than the year before.²

Today's higher education workforce is also getting more comfortable requesting and using the leave they are entitled to. A recent survey by AbsenceSoft found that 85% of employees felt somewhat or completely comfortable³ asking for and taking leave. Quanz even found that at Gonzaga, employees were becoming much more educated about their leave options.

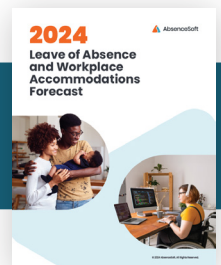
During the past year, requests for leave by employees in higher education:



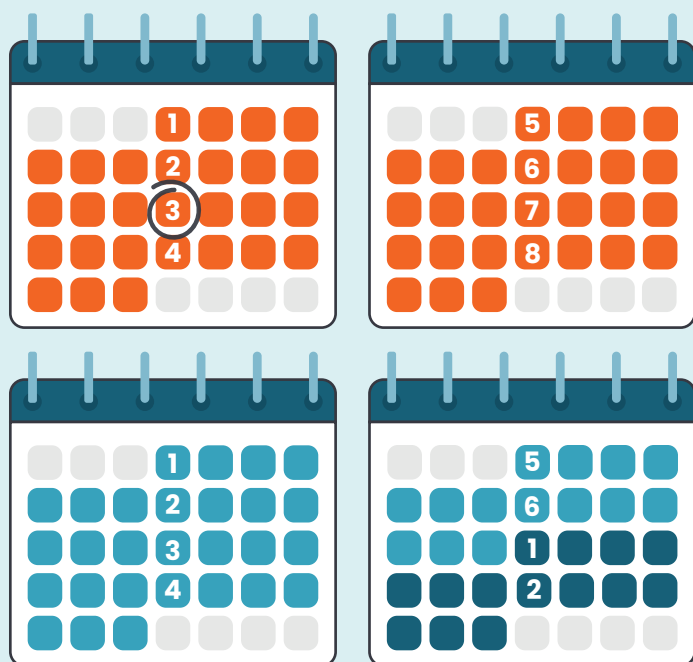
Percentage that leave requests increased over the past year:



[Read the Full Report](#)



"One of the things our employees found out quickly was that they could stack their leaves. When they stack and overlap specific days of FMLA and other leaves... it can be extremely difficult to manage," said Quanz.



16 Weeks Paid Leave When Stacked



A distributed workforce that is well-versed in their benefits—and comfortable using them—places a heavy burden on today's college and university HR Teams. One way to keep up is to add more members to existing HR teams. However, getting new positions approved can be a slow and difficult process, especially in higher education.

That's why many universities and colleges are taking advantage of leave platforms like AbsenceSoft. Today's technology gives HR teams in higher education the tools they need to automate administrative tasks, streamline their processes, and centralize case management across distributed teams.

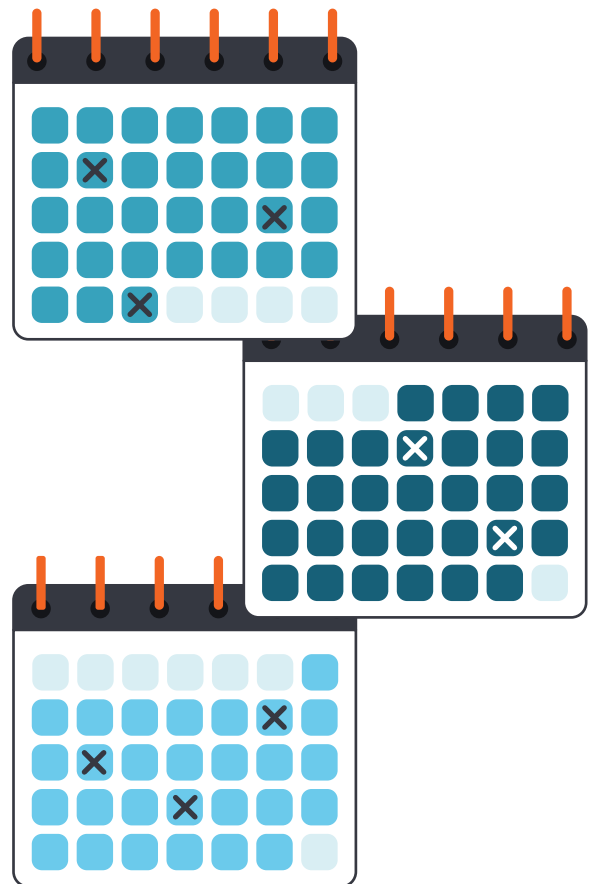
Mental Health–Related Leave and Accommodations

Managing mental health issues was the top reason employees requested both leave (55%) and accommodations (52%), according to our latest forecast report. Mental health-related requests were more prevalent than illness and injury recovery, caregiving, and even parental leave.

“We’ve definitely seen an increase in mental health requests for both leave and accommodations. Whether it’s increased levels of anxiety or increased awareness of neurological disorders like ADHD, it’s been challenging,” recalled Quanz.

Requests for leave and workplace accommodations related to mental health can be more difficult to manage, especially in higher education. Intermittent leave is more frequently requested than consecutive leave, which allows employees to seek treatment or manage their condition during work hours. However, tracking this type of leave is much more difficult. It also requires more frequent planning for their absence, and with less notice than longer leave requests.

At Gonzaga University, Quanz experienced this firsthand. She relies on technology to simplify intermittent leave tracking and improve communications with employees. Because she can track the frequency and duration of intermittent leave taken, Quanz can tell if someone’s condition is improving—or if it is getting worse and the employee may need more help.



“Intermittent leave has always been the most difficult thing to track. Having the ability to go into the system and then anticipate the amount of leave someone is going to take is really great. When we think an employee might start taking more leave, we get a really good opportunity to reach out. We can ask ‘has there been a change?’ or ‘are there other things we need to look at for you?’ Instead of it being a negative interaction, it can be a positive one,” said Quanz.

With students residing on and near campus, colleges and universities can be more community-oriented than other workplaces. This means serious, campus-wide incidents can greatly impact the mental health of the community as whole.

In February 2023 at Michigan State University, there was a shooting on campus. This terrifying event meant that overnight, Lemke’s team was suddenly responding to a very large volume of mental-health related requests.

“When we were unfortunately the victim of a mass shooting on campus, without a doubt, we saw our share of drastic increases in mental health requests,” reflected Lemke.

Close coordination with Michigan State’s employee assistance program (EAP) helped Lemke’s team support their colleagues in a holistic way. It also helped them make mental health resources more readily available and reduce the number of leave requests related to the event.



“Afterwards, we had an entire community facility open for weeks and months to help employees, students, families, or whomever needed it to have someone to talk to. If we didn’t have that, we would have had even more requests, where we likely would have had functions at the university that wouldn’t have been able to continue. But with the EAP making sure everything was accessible, we were able to continue the semester while recognizing that it’s OK to not be OK,” explained Lemke.

When it comes to mental health-related requests, higher education institutions should think of the mental health and safety of their employees just like they think of their physical health and safety. Having a system in place for centralizing, tracking, and managing requests efficiently can also help when major events in campus life occur and caseloads increase rapidly.




Building Better Higher Education Leave and Accommodations Programs with Technology

There is no doubt that managing leave and accommodations in higher education is not the same as it was just five years ago. For decades, HR teams at higher education institutions relied on manual processes to manage reasonable volumes of straightforward requests. However, with today's workforce and rising caseloads, these legacy processes are no longer working for HR teams in modern higher education institutions.


Michigan State University's HR team relied on spreadsheets and physical paper forms until they modernized and automated their leave process. Moving their processes to leave management software allowed them to automate numerous administrative tasks, including the creation of eligibility letters, storing and attaching required forms, sending reminders, notifying managers, and much more.

Case Notes

Phone call on 3/10 at 2:00PM regarding leave request.

Category 

New Communication

Leave Eligibility Notice 

Send

Case Activity

| | |
|------|----------------------------|
| 3/15 | HR Communication |
| 3/13 | Send Eligibility Packet |
| 3/12 | Mgr. Communication |
| 3/10 | Leave of Absence Requested |





“Going from a paper-based system to AbsenceSoft really made a world of difference with regards to some of the automation and organization. We used to spend so much time on a basic eligibility letter. By implementing software, we were able to automate all of that,” said Lemke.

Higher education can have many different groups and types of employees, all with different leave benefits. They can be spread across different campuses, or even be 100% remote. Some work typical school year

calendars while others are year-round administrative staff. All of this can make it very challenging to know precisely what any given employee is eligible for when a request comes in.

Employee Info

 Martin González



Time Tracker

| Policy | Time Used | Time Available |
|--|------------|----------------|
| Family Medical Leave Act | 2.00 weeks | 10.00 weeks |
| Wisconsin Bone Marrow or Organ Donation | 0.00 weeks | 6.00 weeks |
| Wisconsin Family and Medical Leave for Employee Health | 0.00 weeks | 2.00 weeks |
| Wisconsin Family and Medical Leave for Family Health | 0.00 weeks | 2.00 weeks |
| Wisconsin Family and Medical Leave for Parental Leave | 0.00 weeks | 6.00 weeks |


“With AbsenceSoft, we were able to add in our own leave policies for certain groups. Our graduate assistants have different policies than our support staff who have different policies than our faculty and so on – so with each one of those policies can sometimes come a different form, and we’ve been able to automate all that work as far as what our employees are eligible for,” recalled Lemke.

With a leave management platform, documents, forms, and case notes are all centralized in a single location. This allows HR team members who might be distributed at different campus buildings and even home offices to easily collaborate on cases and cover for one another.

"We now have a repository for all these forms that come back to us. We can actually take a scan and add it into the case itself. If someone on the team is out and a question comes to me, I can get into their case and get the details in seconds. That has just been so incredibly helpful in my opinion. It's overall a better employee customer service," said Lemke.

Finally, access to leave and accommodations program data can provide the groundwork for major program improvements. HR teams gain important visibility into their programs to understand trends in usage, cost, and status. These insights can inform strategic decision-making at higher administration levels.

Case: Pregnancy/Maternity 19283657

 Case Attachments

Select Files

| Date | Description | File Name |
|------|-------------|-----------|
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |
| | | |

"With AbsenceSoft's reporting tool, I can pull a report very quickly and at any given time. Typically, quarterly, I report to our executive leadership and the President of the university how many leaves we have open, accommodations open, worker's compensation cases open, and an overall status," said Quanz.

AbsenceSoft is a trusted partner to numerous colleges and universities, helping them modernize their leave and accommodations programs. To learn how AbsenceSoft can partner with you, **schedule a demo today.**

Get a Demo