

UD College of Engineering Staff Focus Groups October 2018

Description of study

In Summer and Fall of 2018, the University of Delaware Center for Research in Education and Social Policy (CRESP) conducted a focus group assessment of staff climate and culture in the UD College of Engineering. Focus groups were held such that each one included only participants from one of five groups. The five groups, with total number of participants from each were: African Americans (5), underrepresented minorities (3), Women in managerial roles (9), Women in non-managerial roles (8), and White men (4). All staff were invited to volunteer to participate. Focus groups lasted an average of an hour. Analysis of the data was organized into six areas: (a) Interactions between staff and supervisors, (b) interactions between staff and faculty, (c) reflections on the COE climate, (d) reflections on inclusion, (e) reflections on equity, and (f) miscellaneous opportunities to improve work climate.

Key results and recommendations

Findings

- Participants described many instances of positive staff-staff and staff-supervisor interactions. Staff reported feeling that they were part of a team, and felt that their supervisors set a positive tone.
- While participants said that interactions with faculty are often positive, they revealed that some difficult staff-faculty dynamics persist. These dynamics appear to negatively impact the staff and their supervisors; staff reported feeling demoralized by these interactions, and felt that they negatively impacted their work performance.
- Staff also reflected that certain hierarchical structures, as well as their high workloads, low compensation, and lack of recognition may contribute to negative climates.
- While overall staff reported feeling supported, participants noted that the current environment does not seem to promote inclusivity for minority and female staff members.
- Participants noted some lack of equity in pay, and reflected that the structure of human resources prevents opportunities for promotion or advancement within departments.
- However staff also noted that they are open to participating in opportunities for improvement, such as creating a staff mentor/mentee program, or clarifying SOP's.

Recommendations

- There are opportunities to improve faculty-staff dynamics. Gaining a greater understanding of these issues to determine how widespread they are, minimizing precipitating factors, rewarding positive interactions, finding models for positive interactions within the COE, and gaining buy-in from leadership may help improve interactions.
- Fostering current environments of inclusivity and integrating training opportunities into existing standing meetings may help promote an inclusive environment.
- Staff across all diversity groups implied that the current hierarchical structure with respect to leadership decision making is not inclusive. Staff are rarely invited to participate, or contribute even when the agenda items are related to their area of expertise or directly affect their work flow/productivity. To improve the COE climate, staff suggested several changes that would demonstrate upper management and faculty value their opinions: Communicate clearly and consistently; integrate staff into the decision-making structures; have all staff participate in 360 evaluation surveys of the managers; continue to assess how and when staff are marginalized and/or excluded; and encourage a stronger sense of engagement by integrating team-building activities across departments.

- Staff are proud of the contributions they make to the COE. While they may be recognized for their efforts by other staff, staff are not recognized in front of faculty. Recognizing staff during faculty meetings, deans/chairs meetings, and college faculty meetings is important.
- Staff complain that the HR structure prevents mobility and opportunities for advancement; leadership should consider creative solutions and fair practices that offer staff the opportunity to advance, develop and increase pay.