

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

Department of Agronomy and Horticulture Staff Retreat Summary and Recommendations: Prepared by the Staff Advisory Committee

Introduction and Background

In 2014 and 2015, the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources (IANR) conducted focus groups (<https://ianhr.unl.edu/documents/IANR-HR-Focus-Group-Results.pdf>) and a staff survey (<https://ianhr.unl.edu/documents/Staff-Culture-Survey-Summary-2015.pdf>) (intended to be repeated annually) as part of its ‘INSPIRE talent management project,’ with the goal of identifying the project’s priorities and tracking its progress, respectively.

According to the results of the 2014 focus groups, “Some of the top workforce/talent challenges facing IANR today include: attracting and retaining the right talent; current pay, rewards & recognition; the need for staff training and professional development; time-consuming and inflexible HR processes; staff workload; evolving workforce; lack of promotion opportunities and career paths for staff; [and] an image of a staff/caste system.”

Helpfully, the project laid out “evidence that will prove ‘INSPIRE’ is successful,” namely, “selection and retention of the right talent; less turnover; a staff that feels valued, engaged and committed to their work; options for staff career advancement; equitable salaries with opportunities for raises; access to training and development opportunities; [and] simplified HR processes.”

Fast forward to mid-2022, when the Agronomy and Horticulture Staff Advisory Committee (SAC) was tasked with hosting a staff retreat. The aim of the retreat was to bring department staff together for collaborative discussions focused on (1) laying out major challenges faced by staff, and (2) brainstorming possible solutions to these problems in the form of recommendations.

The similarity between the challenges identified by IANR staff in 2014-15 and those identified by department staff in 2022 is striking. The INSPIRE project identified the need for “recognition that staff opinions/ideas/contributions are not adequately included or valued.” While we cannot speak to whether this recognition exists among administrators, supervisors, and faculty, it seems clear that, by and large, the staff opinions and ideas contributed to the INSPIRE project have not been acted upon.

We will describe the major challenges confronting staff (and, by extension, the department), followed by concrete recommendations to address these challenges. At the end of this document, we will include an addendum describing lessons learned from the retreat itself, with special attention paid to how to better include the entire “staff community” in future deliberations.

Challenges Identified by Agronomy and Horticulture Staff

At the retreat, department staff discussed a slew of major challenges they are facing, many of which are intertwined to some degree.

Broadly, the major challenges we discussed are:

1. Hiring challenges and related financial challenges
2. The understaffing, ‘duty creep,’ burnout cycle
3. Communication challenges

Hiring challenges and related financial challenges.

The department, like many employers at this time, is struggling to fill vital staff positions and keep them filled. While the effects of COVID-19 has exacerbated this challenge, we believe the department’s struggle and its underlying causes predate the pandemic.

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

The hiring process itself contributes to the failure to hire staff. The multitude of steps and levels of approval required to hire someone causes the hiring process to take entirely too long. The large time gap between someone applying for a job and a hiring decision being made not only prolongs the period when existing staff must cover for empty positions, it also means that applicants have often accepted other jobs by the time a job offer is extended to them.

Current pay rates, especially for entry-level workers, are not competitive. Hourly workers report that some retail job opportunities in Lincoln are offering starting wages of \$18/hour. While we recognize that the University is a public institution beholden to budget limitations, it cannot expect to attract high-quality job candidates without offering competitive pay. In a similar vein, the high cost of campus parking permits (i.e., paying to come to work) makes relatively low-wage jobs even less attractive. The current permitting system does not reflect the equity for which the University strives.

Conventional wisdom seems to hold that the excellent non-wage benefits offered by the University act as an offset to relatively low wages when it comes to recruitment. Yet, as far back as 2014, the INSPIRE project acknowledged that “benefits are no longer our strongest recruiting tool.” Eight years later, it is apparent that non-wage benefits are not a draw for younger would-be job applicants. Under current policy, an employee under the age of 30 cannot begin contributing to a retirement account until two years into their employment. Paid time off (PTO) is a strong benefit, but, as discussed in the next section, it is difficult for many staff to use their PTO when the department is constantly understaffed.

Lastly, the department lacks an adequate onboarding process for staff. This puts new employees on an uneven footing with little guidance for how to find the information or help that they need to be successful. The INSPIRE project identified this problem in 2014 as well.

Recommendations

At the department level, we make the following recommendations:

- Develop a formal, substantial, and sustainable onboarding process that accommodates all types of staff housed in the department.
- Add more information to the department’s staff directory (<https://agronomy.unl.edu/staff-directory>) to make it a resource, especially for new staff. We envision something similar to the bios available in the faculty directory, or the information already available for HAPPI staff (<https://ianrbc.unl.edu/happi-business-center>). One could click on a staff member’s “info” link, and it would list what they do, any expertise they possess (e.g., lab equipment use, computer programs, etc.), and perhaps some brief biographical information.
- Barring action at the University level (see the IANR-/University-level recommendations below), the department should consider subsidizing campus parking costs for staff who (1) must be on campus to do their jobs, (2) must drive their personal vehicles to do business, and/or (3) pay more than 1.5% of their salary for a 12-month permit. (In 2022, an annual permit costs \$576. That means a person making \$38,400 per year pays 1.5% of their salary just to park at work.)

At the IANR and/or University level, we make the following recommendations:

- Streamline the hiring process for staff. Eliminate or reduce higher-level (above department) approval requirements for some or all staff positions. Place staff hiring decisions in the hands of the departments themselves.
- Reform the campus parking permit system for equity. Consider an income bracket system in which higher earners pay more for parking while lower earners pay less. Alternatively, connect parking costs with length of employment: the longer someone stays with UNL, the lower their parking costs.

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

The understaffing, ‘duty creep,’ burnout cycle.

While the hiring challenges discussed above contribute to the understaffing problem, they are not its only cause.

Some department staff (perhaps best exemplified by the office professionals) are experiencing burdensome workloads as a result of what we have termed ‘duty creep’: being expected by others to do duties outside their job description, do the duties of unfilled positions for extended periods of time, and/or do things at the last minute or outside of normal work hours.

‘Duty creep,’ combined with understaffing, has become a vicious cycle. In a very real sense, some staff feel that “the punishment for doing good work is more work.” Those who are having to “pick up the slack” feel overwhelmed with work responsibilities. These staff often feel that they can’t use their PTO because (1) no one else knows what they do or how they do it, and (2) they can’t afford to let department business fall behind in their absence. To compound this problem, the University is unaccommodating when it comes to reasonably compensating people for taking on extra work responsibilities. This leads the department’s best people, the ones who are willing to go above and beyond, to feel undervalued and, eventually, burnt out. As people become burnt out, apathy and bad attitudes take hold, negatively affecting workplace culture. As culture deteriorates, the cycle continues. As the INSPIRE project found in its 2015 staff survey, it is “impossible to expect the same quality of performance when workload is continually increasing.”

Limited opportunities for staff career growth or advancement also contribute to understaffing and turn-over. For many staff, there exist no incentives for staying in their positions long-term, nor for participating in professional development. Knowing how to get a promotion (or whether one is even available to them in their position) is a big question for staff.

We have identified confusion about ‘performance conversations’ and a lack of transparency about the merit pay increase process. On the topic of performance conversations, staff find themselves asking, “What is their purpose? Do they factor into merit increases? Are they even mandatory?” As for the merit pay increase process, our understanding is that supervisors make recommendations to the department head, who then unilaterally decides who gets pay increases and how much.

Supervisors then inform their employees of the decision during a ‘merit conversation.’ Staff might justifiably ask, “Can an employee appeal a decision? How? Would an appeal be handled in a timely manner? How is administration ensuring that supervisors have the ‘merit conversations’ they are supposed to have with their employees?”

Recommendations

At the department level, we make the following recommendations:

- Supervisors and administrators should empower their staff to say ‘no’ when they are asked to do things outside the purview of their job descriptions or when faced with unreasonable requests. Indeed, administration should make it clear that a person should not assume that a staff member will do things for them when that staff member does not report to them; rather, the person needs to make a request. Supervisors should also empower their staff to use the PTO they’ve earned. Beyond ‘empowering’ staff, supervisors and administrators should be encouraged to stand up for their staff in these situations.
- Ensure that the department is maximally utilizing the NU Values system (<https://hr.unl.edu/compensation/salary.shtml/>) to its staffs benefit (i.e., wage equity, professional development, advancement).
- Incentivize staff professional development and ensure that the department is supporting staff who want to better themselves professionally. Among the factors identified by the INSPIRE project that influence whether staff participate in professional development are “general support of IANR and the department,” “manager awareness and development support,” and “rewards and incentives in place for

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

participating.” We believe an important step toward assuring department support for the professional growth of its staff will be to establish a staff mentoring program. Supervisor buy-in is also critical: nearly 37% of INSPiRE staff survey respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, “My direct supervisor and I have talked about my career goals and professional development opportunities.”

- Establish a staff mentoring program. We recommend finding someone at UNL with expertise in this area to help the department ‘found’ a staff mentoring program, perhaps during a lunch hour program/seminar. This would allow the SAC and/or department to avoid ‘reinventing the wheel’ by leveraging existing expertise.
- Clarify the purpose of ‘performance conversations.’ Tell staff (and supervisors) whether they are mandatory or recommended, why, and if/how they factor into merit increases. Money matters, and staff deserve straight answers on such important topics.
- Increase the transparency of the merit increase process. Consider creating a factsheet that describes the process in terms of (1) what information is and is not taken into consideration, (2) a timeline of each step in the process, (3) mechanisms for supervisor accountability, and (4) recourse for staff who disagree with their merit rating. Such a factsheet should be kept up-to-date and easily accessible year-round. Additionally, when the merit increase process is completed in a given year, consider reporting to the entire department a breakdown of how the department’s supervisors ‘rated’ their underlings (without names) and how the merit pool was ultimately distributed. (For example, suppose there are 100 staff in the department. A report might state that 10 staff were rated ‘Exceptional Performance,’ 20 were rated ‘Consistently Exceeded Expectations,’ 50 rated ‘Fulfilled Expectations,’ 15 rated ‘Somewhat Meets/Does Not Meet,’ and 5 rated ‘Did Not Meet Expectations.’ The report might then state the percent pay increase each of these groups is slated to receive, plus any individual deviations.)
- Develop a staff promotion/advancement mechanism that is transparent and consensus-based. Consider a ‘promotions board’ composed of both staff and faculty who would deliberate and seek consensus on granting/not granting promotions to staff. We note that a similar system of peer evaluation is in place for faculty promotions.

At the IANR and/or University level, we make the following recommendations:

- Ensure that IANR is maximally utilizing the NU Values system to its staffs benefit (i.e., wage equity, professional development, advancement).
- Reevaluate the IANR ‘Temporary Pay Increase’ policy. The current policy only allows temporary pay increases when staff temporarily assume “additional duties which are at a higher level or scope” than their normal duties. We believe this policy should be amended to accommodate staff who, due to unfilled positions, are doing multiple positions’ worth of work, albeit not at a “higher level.”
- Clarify and reevaluate the IANR ‘Permanent Pay Increase’ policies. Currently, ‘Performance/Merit Increase,’ ‘Market/Internal Equity Increase,’ and ‘Reclassification (Promotion/Advancement)’ are the three avenues identified for permanent pay increases. Specifically, staff need clarification on the following points:
 - How often are market/internal equity evaluations conducted? How are they conducted (group basis, individual basis)? Do individual staff have to request that an evaluation be conducted? Are the results shared transparently with those affected? (We have heard, anecdotally, that some positions on City Campus are paid more than positions on East Campus with identical titles.)
 - How, exactly, does the reclassification process work? If a person seeks reclassification, must they interview for their new job while, in effect, their old position is eliminated? Is this fair? What happens if they are passed over for the new position because another interviewee is deemed more qualified?

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

Does the staff member have recourse in such a situation? We believe these concerns have a chilling effect on staff seeking reclassification. Furthermore, IANR HR says that reclassification “occurs when an employee takes on work at a higher level of responsibility or has a significant change in duties/responsibilities,” yet concludes by saying that reclassification “may result in a pay increase.” We believe that a reclassification with higher levels of responsibility should always result in a pay increase.

- Incentivize long-term employment. Consider offering a retention bonus to staff who stay in their jobs for long periods of time (e.g., for every five years of service). This idea has been discussed by the UNL Faculty Senate Executive Committee (<https://www.unl.edu/facultysenate/exec/22jun2lmins.pdf>). Alternatively, consider establishing tiers for staff positions, similar to the existing Research Technologist I, II, and III. This would give staff something to work toward and motivate them to remain with the department. Reclassification should not be the only avenue for most staff to advance in their careers or be rewarded for longevity of employment, especially given the problematic aspects of reclassification discussed in the previous bullet point.

Communication challenges.

Interwoven with many of the challenges described above are communication challenges. The complexity of addressing communication issues is illustrated by the fact that, during the retreat’s SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats), staff listed communication as both a strength and a weakness.

The sheer number of information sources can make it difficult to identify what is important and what is not, especially for relatively new staff. A person receives communications from their own supervisor/team, the department, IANR, and the University at-large. Furthermore, given Agronomy and Horticulture’s position at the crossroads of all three land grant missions (teaching, research, and extension), information from the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (CASNR), the Agricultural Research Division (ARD), and Nebraska Extension is either distributed redundantly or unevenly. (An example of uneven communication: a staff member with an Extension appointment recently received the minutes of the UNL Faculty Senate Executive Committee meeting because they were distributed on an Extension listserv by an Extension senator. However, non-Extension staff did not receive these minutes, despite the fact that they contained discussions directly pertaining to them.)

How can people filter the large amount of information they receive? How can the administrative hierarchies make it less necessary for people to filter through information? In other words, how can they ensure all relevant information is being provided to all relevant recipients, while at the same time reducing over-communication on less relevant topics?

Recommendations

At the department and/or IANR level, we make the following recommendations:

- Coordinate high-level information sharing for maximum transparency and efficiency. For example, instead of distributing Faculty Senate Executive Committee minutes piecemeal (<https://www.unl.edu/facultysenate/exec/22jun2lmins.pdf>), consider putting one person in charge of distributing the minutes to all faculty and staff at UNL. This would ensure everyone gets the information, without receiving duplicates.
- Consider setting up more specific listservs to be used for communications that are not relevant to wider audiences. This would require ensuring that the right people are signed up for the right listservs, which could be incorporated systematically into the onboarding process recommended above. There is currently no listserv for department staff only.
- Consolidate. For example, when candidates for faculty positions are being interviewed, instead of sending a new email for each step in the process for each candidate, consider a simple, personnel-access-only webpage featuring all candidates’ CVs, interview/seminar schedules and recordings, and survey forms.

STAFF RETREAT REPORT

Addendum: Lessons learned for future staff retreats and activities

The SAC was given a very short time to plan and host the 2022 staff retreat. Despite the time constraints, most felt the retreat went well. However, we have identified shortcomings in our approach, which we lay out here in the hopes of improving future staff activities.

The most glaring shortcoming of the retreat was the near-total absence of field and lab staff in attendance. While we were able to have good discussions with other staff, the voices of field/lab staff were not part of the conversation. We feel it is imperative to include these voices in future discussions. Some ways to accomplish this:

- Schedule staff activities to coincide with relatively slow work periods. For field staff, this would mean scheduling things between Thanksgiving and the start of the spring semester. Increased field staff attendance of safety seminars has been noted during this window.
- Facilitate the participation of off-campus staff. The most obvious way to do this is to encourage Zoom participation. We should also consider hosting retreats or a staff tour at off campus locations. This would help show that we value the participation of field staff, and, by exposing on-campus staff to the department's off-campus sites, could provide the foundation for a more cohesive "staff community."
- Encourage buy-in from everyone in the department (not just all staff, but supervisors, faculty, and administrators as well) by being clearer about what staff activities are trying to accomplish. This buy-in is especially critical before the actual activity when we are attempting to identify the topics staff want to talk about. We will need help from administration to attain this buy-in. We should also be more explicit in our communications about who we mean by "Agronomy and Horticulture staff" so that, for example, staff in the Stewart Seed Lab know that we want them involved.

Some staff have suggested holding separate retreats/activities for each of the staff groupings present in the department (admin/business center, lab/computer, field/greenhouse). While we recognize that this would allow us to tailor each event to the needs of each group, we believe it would also eliminate opportunities for community building and the cross-pollination of ideas, as well as tripling the amount of work required of the SAC (or requiring the formation of a separate 'retreat committee').

The SAC has devoted a large amount of time and effort to the 2022 retreat, both before and after the event itself. While we value opportunities to facilitate important discussions and represent our colleagues' interests, we feel it is important to emphasize that we each have full job responsibilities outside of our committee work, and that the members of this committee serve on a voluntary, non compensatory basis. Therefore, we note that in order to continue facilitating impactful staff retreats in the future:

- The SAC needs more time. In 2022, there were only about two months between the time we were asked to host a retreat and the day the retreat was held.
- The SAC needs more guidance. The 2022 retreat was somewhat tied to the upcoming Academic Program Review, but future retreats may not be. What will be the aim of those retreats? What is administration's vision for annual staff retreats? We would also benefit from receiving more logistical parameters (e.g., budget, preferred expense account, report deadline, etc.) early in the planning process.
- As noted above, the SAC needs administration's help gaining buy-in from everyone in the department.