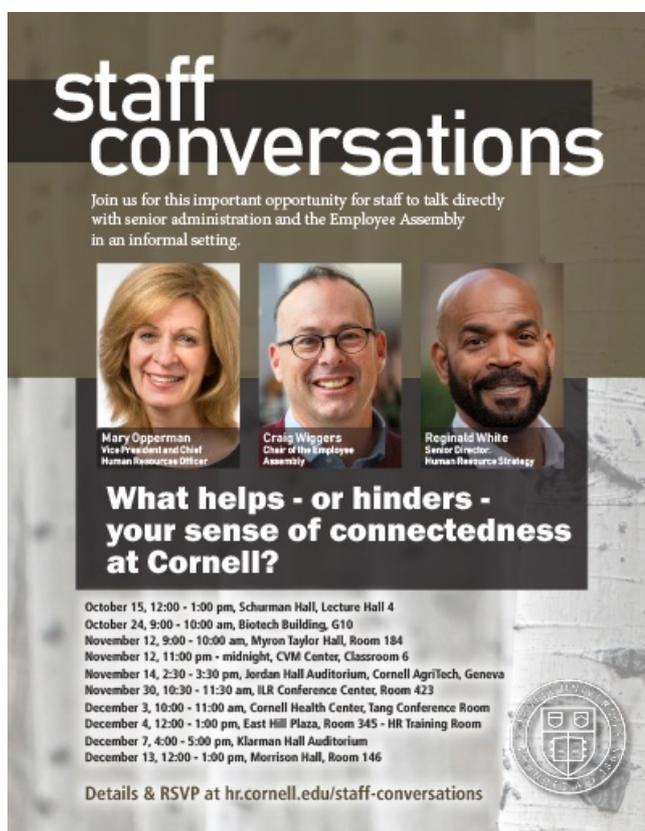




Staff Conversations Report

STAFF CONVERSATIONS – FALL 2018 SUMMARY REPORT

Download report in its entirety, including appendices of recommendations and staff comments



This past fall, 2018, Vice President and Chief Human

Resources Officer Mary Opperman, Senior Director HR Strategy Reginald White, and the Employee Assembly teamed up to host 11 “Staff Conversations” across the main campus, East Hill Plaza, Seneca Place and Geneva to hear from staff. Each one-hour session focused on four core questions:

- What helps or hinders your sense of connectedness on campus?
- What systems or processes are currently in place to help you feel connected to Cornell?
- What have you done or might you do to create a sense of connected community at Cornell?
- What advice or recommendations do you have for HR / EA?

Purpose and Context:

Sessions were designed to be informal and encourage participants to share their insights and experiences of belonging as the university works to enhance the workplace climate for Cornell staff. We – the HR division and EA – were interested in understanding where HR and EA efforts are having an impact and where we need to improve.

Outcome:

Approximately 250 staff – exempt, non-exempt, individual contributors, supervisors and union employees – participated in the 11 sessions. The feedback was wide-ranging and informative. Following the sessions, members of the EA and HR analytics worked together to discuss how to thematically categorize staff members' comments. In total, 54 pages of notes were collected. Using emerging themes, the EA will partner with Cornell units in evaluating and develop actions and outcomes to address and improve Cornell's staff environment.

In many cases, comments or ideas mentioned by staff are currently in place or have the attention of senior leadership. This overlap leads us to believe that one outcome should be for HR and the EA, as well as other Cornell offices, to strive to more effectively communicate across the university. There were also several unique and potentially "game changing" ideas that, if properly shepherded through the appropriate units and organizations, could lead to immediate action on behalf of the staff community.

Over the next few pages, our summary intends to introduce the identified themes, highlight some of the direct comments and, finally, discuss what recommendations will be forwarded to the appropriate university organization for assessment of implementation. Lastly, all of the raw information – to include every comment recorded – is shared in the attached appendices.

Thematic Categories:

1. Improving Connectedness and Community
2. Communication and Messaging – Enhancing our tools
3. Access to University Programs and Activities (particularly for non-exempt staff, those with non-traditional work hours and distant proximity to central campus)
4. Workload
5. Supervisor / Employee Relationships (including faculty supervisors)
6. Opportunities for Development and Career Growth
7. Transportation
8. Oversight

The feedback from the staff community was incredibly helpful to our understanding of effective staff programming areas for improvement. Overwhelmingly, staff are pleased with university training offerings and professional development opportunities. Additionally, there were numerous favorable comments about staff members volunteering in university-sponsored events such as Slope Day and Commencement. Despite these positive comments, it became clear that we should continue to identify more effective communication tools and methods to enhance staff awareness of these opportunities. Perceptions of "connectedness" at Cornell are often driven by staff awareness. Time and again, we heard and acknowledge the university's over-reliance on email. We also recognize the important balance between posters or fliers with a view toward minimizing waste and being stewards of the environment. The Division of University Relations is currently working to identify communication challenges and assess best practices with the goal of enhancing communications to internal audiences.

Cornell University's geographic size and a staff community of over 8,200 present unique challenges as well as opportunities to enhance "connectedness and community" for our employees. Highlighting best practices and sharing new ideas allow us to mitigate some of our barriers to connectedness. Central HR and the EA recognize and acknowledge the need for a more robust onboarding for new staff. In the coming months the "Big Red Welcome" will be introduced and will provide a much more comprehensive introduction to Cornell and the EA will partner with HR in this effort (see appendix A). The University wants new staff to feel that they are joining a team that will support the new staff in making the professional transition to Cornell's workforce. During the conversations a staff member shared a "best practice" that also addresses this issue. One college has instituted an Ambassador Program to welcome new staff members and facilitate the exploration of Cornell events and staff programs. The ambassador assists the new employee in understanding unit practices as well as navigating some of the complexities and nuances of Cornell.

One of our core questions during the Staff Conversations was, "what hinders your sense of connectedness at Cornell?" We received a wide range of responses. Many staff members indicated the high cost of living in Ithaca and longer commutes limited their ability to participate in campus events. Over 30% of staff and over 40% of union employees live outside of Tompkins County (See Appendix C). This presents a real challenge for those traveling longer distances to access after-hour's programs. University administrators are keenly aware of this and are taking pro-active steps to consider potential housing solutions for employees who would like to live closer to Cornell.

"One of the biggest hindrances in getting to campus is planning in one-hour-plus travel time and if the bus decides to run."

In August of 2017, *Market Watch* identified Ithaca as the seventh most expensive place to raise a family in the U.S. Just this past month, a team of managers from across campus took on a project to better understand the current challenges faced by staff who wish to live closer but face financial burdens when attempting to do so. This issue affects our ability to professionally and personally connect to Cornell and the community. It also impacts recruitment, retention and quality of life for our staff.

Other frequently raised comments addressed supervisor and staff relations, and the perceived inequality of the implementation / access to campus programming during working hours.

“There is a need for supervisors to be proactive to raise awareness and promote these new outlets. It takes a while for a low level and new employee to know it's OK to join in activities and take advantage of the opportunities.”

The decentralized nature of the university structures are partly responsible for this perception, but at the same time, colleges and units should have the freedom to implement policies and procedures that best support their business practices. Another aspect that leads to inequality is the range of supervisor interpretation and implementation of policy for staff. These comments have also come from the University Managers Working Group – which has EA membership participation. This group was created by the College Officers in an effort to enhance collaboration and communication across campus in order to share best practices as well as reduce the perceived differences between units. Additionally, this past December, Vice President Opperman and her team of central HR leadership hosted the first HR Managers Forum. This forum was created to increase supervisor education of university initiatives. Following the very positive feedback from this first meeting, Vice President Opperman will be offering this forum to all university staff in February.

Staff also discussed the importance of maintaining workload balance. It has been observed that as new initiatives increase, existing work remains the same, leading some to question if staff should assess opportunities to delegate, streamline or restructure their existing responsibilities. Partnering with HR's Work/Life Balance Team, the EA will continue to explore potential solutions and opportunities for improvement. Time in the workday remains the same, but there is an impression that the amount of work is steadily increasing.

“People use what resources they have to do the most with less. And we've been doing this for years. People have reached the point of exhaustion. It feels like the staff is doing the heavy lifting. There has been a limiting of resources, and the amount of work has stayed consistent. So it feels like the staff is being asked to do more with less.”

Units, managers and staff should continuously assess the value of work and types of work. Doing things “because that's the way we have always done it,” leads to stagnation and often affects staff morale. During President Martha Pollack's fall 2017 Address to Staff, she promoted innovation and asked staff to “[take risks](#).” Innovation comes from responsible risk-taking.

The last element of the Staff Conversations summary is a call to the university's senior leadership to continue what you do by making staff relationships personal. During each of our engagements with staff, it was clear how much they appreciated connections with our leadership. Comments ranged from the gratitude of central HR's outreach during the Staff Conversations to examples of “Coffee with the Dean,” and employee celebrations. It is clear from the feedback we received that Cornell's leadership cares about its employees and strives to identify and improve the climate for our workforce – keep up the great work!

The Employee Assembly and central HR are committed to identifying collaborations and partnerships across the university to continually assess staff connectedness and, more importantly, identify areas we can improve. This past semester's Staff Discussions gave us a tremendous amount of information and we will do our best to continue the open dialogue with staff and turn staff ideas into action.

The Employee Assembly

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