
Working at Iowa

Results from College of Education Focus Groups, February 2010

Executive Summary

In 2008, The University of Iowa (UI) provided employees the opportunity to complete a Working at Iowa (WAI) survey in an effort to measure employee engagement and to promote continuous improvement and excellence throughout the institution. Disaggregated results for the College of Education were shared with faculty and staff, and with the support of Dean Sandra Bowman Damico, the College of Education (COE) Staff Council sponsored focus groups in February 2010 to discuss the findings and gain greater understanding of issues of importance in the COE.

Over 89 percent of employees in the COE completed the WAI, and the results reflected a high level of workplace satisfaction in a number of areas. Staff and faculty look for more effective ways to do their jobs and feel they understand what is expected of them. COE results suggested that respondents felt they could discuss inappropriate behavior with someone without fear of negative consequences; disaggregated results among faculty and staff, however, found this was true of faculty and not staff. Respondents also felt their units had flexibility that allowed them to participate on UI committees; disaggregated results found this to be true of faculty and P & S staff, but not merit staff. Faculty and staff felt they understood how their jobs fit into the University's mission, felt they had the authority to make decisions, and agreed that they have the resources to do their jobs.

Areas identified as needing improvement included supervisory management of poor performance and of work-related conflicts. Over 38 percent of respondents noted that they did not receive information about workplace budget status, but staff did not report this as problematic; few have authentic oversight over budgets, and those who are involved in financial decisions have access to workplace budgets. Over 30 percent of COE respondents disagreed that workloads were distributed fairly, and over 27 percent of employees responded that they either did not receive annual reviews or did not receive feedback that helped them improve their performance. Over 28 percent disagreed that the University had a clear plan for a stronger future.

COE focus groups were facilitated by representatives from UI Organizational Effectiveness, and provided participating staff the opportunity to safely discuss the salience and significance of WAI results, especially areas of concern. This report details discussion points of note, specific concerns, and opportunities for positive change in three areas, including the management of work-related conflicts, the management of poor performance, and the equitable distribution of workloads. Many of the same concerns and recommendations for change were apparent across the three main topics of discussion.

When noted throughout this Focus Group report, the term "supervisor" applies to any employee of the College of Education who has supervisory responsibilities, including Faculty, DEOs, Deans, Unit Directors, P&S, Merit Exempt and Merit staff who supervise students.

Staff members reported high levels of anxiety about incivility and disrespectful conduct—even bullying—in the COE by both co-workers and supervisors. Staff members feared retribution if they sought assistance with conflicts, and they saw no clearly defined path for resolution when they were not treated respectfully. Staff feared that bullying and workplace ineffectiveness could become part of the COE culture.

Participants believed that more effective communication could resolve concerns, including better delineation of responsibilities and greater clarity about expectations. Staff also believed the COE would benefit from a clearly articulated policy on conflict resolution; many participants were also uncertain about the COE policy related to participation on committees and how such participation contributed to COE workplace effectiveness.

Finally, staff members would like to see fundamental shifts in COE procedures to ensure greater supervisory accountability. Although the Dean is regularly evaluated by staff as well as faculty, staff have very little or no opportunity to evaluate supervisors at any level, including DEOs and unit directors. Feedback from unit evaluations and/or reviews, combined with clearly articulated expectations that supervisors would take advantage of

easily accessible resources to enhance their communication and managerial skills, were both perceived as important commitments to a more positive and productive working environment.

The COE Staff Council would like to see Dean Damico charge an ad hoc committee to use summer 2010, to develop an action plan that reflects the concerns and opportunities for positive change illuminated through the focus groups. The action plan needs to include specific

- objectives,
- activities,
- timelines,
- individual(s) responsible for each objective,
- strategies, and
- necessary resources.

The next WAI survey, scheduled for 2012, will provide a substantive evaluation of progress in areas of concern.

Working at Iowa

Results from College of Education Focus Groups, February 2010

This report provides an overview of results from the 2008 Working at Iowa (WAI) survey, first from the University and then disaggregated for the College of Education (COE), and a more extensive exploration of the results of focus group discussions of areas of concern identified through the 2008 survey. The release of results, including comparisons from findings from the first WAI survey conducted in 2006, was delayed by months, because of staff preoccupation with resolving issues resulting from the 2008 floods, because of efforts to make relevant statistical comparisons between years, and because of looming budget concerns during the 2008 – 2009 fiscal year. The delay in results, as well as the changing financial climate on campus, may have dampened interest and/or confidence in the efficacy of using results to strengthen workplace climate and effectiveness. The COE Staff Council, however, with the support of Dean Sandra Bowman Damico, sponsored both an open information session in October 2009, to review and discuss COE results from the 2008 survey, and focus groups open to all COE personnel in February 2010, to gain greater understanding of issues of importance in the College. The focus group results define areas of disquiet among staff across the College, as well as provide suggestions for strengthening the College culture.

Background

The University of Iowa provided employees the opportunity to complete a WAI survey in 2008, in an effort to measure employee engagement and promote continuous improvement and excellence throughout the institution. The survey was a confidential instrument, asking faculty and staff how they feel about their work environment. The 2008 WAI was the second time the survey had been administered (details about the 2006 WAI survey are available in Appendix 1, pages 10-11), and survey results from 2006 have been used by both the University administration, and within colleges and units throughout the University, to support continuing improvement to the work environment and the engagement of faculty and staff to their work. The University noted that the continued use of the instrument “was intended to create a continuous improvement cycle to help the University achieve its goals for excellence: assess, prioritize and act on survey results, measure progress, and then repeat” (http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/survey_report_final.pdf). The 2008 survey was perceived as an opportunity to measure and identify the progress made in building a more positive and productive working environment, as well as to refocus efforts for future improvements. The 2008 results are viewed as a benchmark for the next survey, anticipated for 2012.

University of Iowa WAI Results: 2008

All results related to the WAI process at The University of Iowa are available at <http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/index.html>. General observations reported from the 2008 WAI results include:

- The participation rate at the University in the 2008 survey was 62.3%, well above the 2006 rate of 42.6%.
- The demographics of the survey participants were generally consistent with University faculty and staff overall in terms of gender, sex, age, race and length of employment, and were similar to the 2006 survey participant demographics.
- University staff and faculty continue to be very positive about their work experience overall.
- A comparison of 2008 to 2006 response data shows statistically significant difference in 28 of 45 survey items. All the differences show a shift in the distribution of the six response levels in 2008 toward positive improvement.
- Progress was indicated in three of the five survey items targeted for improvement from the 2006 survey. These included managing work related conflicts, workload distribution and effective performance management.
- Survey results also indicate that opportunity for improvement still exists in these areas, along with effective communication on both the unit budget status and plans to strengthen the University.

Strengths identified in the 2008 survey noted that in general terms, University staff and faculty:

- continue to look for more effective ways to do their work.
- understand what is expected of them in their jobs.
- understand how their jobs fit into the University's overall mission.
- believe their units have a strong focus on providing excellent service.
- have the basic resources to do their work.

Areas identified by staff and faculty as needing improvement University-wide included:

- continued concerns about the appropriate management of poor performance.
- ongoing lack of information about the status of workplace budgets.
- enduring observations that workloads are not distributed fairly.
- persistent perceptions that work-related conflicts are not managed constructively.
- ongoing concerns about the existence of a clear plan to strengthen the UI.

College of Education WAI Results: 2008

Faculty and staff from the College of Education (COE) participated in the 2008 WAI survey at a rate far exceeding that of the University, with 89.9 percent of all employees completing the instrument. Changes identified in the COE between results from 2006 to 2008 had less than a 3.5 percentage point difference except where noted; the report and all comparisons may be found in their entirety through either the COE Staff Council Webpage (<http://www.education.uiowa.edu/edstaffcouncil/events/WAI-FAQ-2009-10.htm>) or the COE Human Resources (HR) Website (<http://www.education.uiowa.edu/coedean/coehr.htm>). Strengths identified in the COE 2008 survey found that:

- 100 percent of COE employees look for more effective ways to do their work.
- 93.7 percent of COE staff and faculty know what is expected of them in their jobs.
- 93.4 percent of COE faculty and staff feel they can go to someone to discuss inappropriate behavior without fear of negative consequences, up from 81.9 percent in 2006.
- 92.6 percent of COE staff and faculty recognize the flexibility that units provide, allowing employees to participate in UI sponsored committees.
- 92.4 percent of COE employees understand how their jobs fit into the overall mission of the University
- 91.9 percent of COE faculty and staff have the authority to make decisions.
- 90.5 percent COE staff and faculty have the basic resources necessary to their jobs.

Compared to University results, COE employees felt greater confidence in their access to someone to discuss inappropriate behavior without fear of negative consequences. Although COE employees felt slightly less confident in 2008 than in 2006 (92.6 percent in 2008 and 95.6 percent in 2006) in having the flexibility to serve on committees, they agreed with this statement more strongly than those in the wider University community. Finally, COE employees felt slightly less confident in their authority to make decisions (91.9 percent in 2008 and 92.7 percent in 2006); nevertheless, they agreed with this statement more strongly than employees throughout the University.

Areas identified by COE faculty and staff as needing improvement continued to include:

- managing poor performance appropriately (42.2 percent in 2008, down from 48.9 percent in 2006, disagreed with the survey statement that poor performance was managed appropriately).
- managing work-related conflicts constructively (34.7 percent in 2008, down from 41.6 percent in 2006, disagreed with the statement that work-related conflicts were managed constructively).
- being informed of the workplace budget status (41.1 percent in 2008, compared to 40.4 percent in 2006, disagreed that they were informed of workplace budget status).
- receiving feedback at annual reviews to help employees improve performance (27.1 percent in 2008, down from 36.8 percent in 2006, disagreed that they received feedback from annual reviews that helped them improve performance).

Areas not ranked among the top concerns in 2006, but identified in 2008 as most needing improvement included COE concerns that:

- workloads are not distributed fairly (33 percent in 2008, down from 35.9 percent in 2006, disagreed that workloads are distributed fairly).
- the University lacks a clear plan to for a stronger future (28.6 percent in 2008, down from 36.4 percent in 2006, disagreed that the University has a clear plan for a stronger future).

Compared to the University as a whole, the COE shared all the same concerns, reflected in very similar percentages. COE employees, however, also expressed concerns about feedback from annual reviews and/or whether such feedback helped them improve their performance.

COE Focus Groups: 2008

The COE learned more about the 2008 WAI results through an open presentation sponsored by the COE Staff Council, COE HR representative, Christine Annicella, and provided by University of Iowa Organizational Effectiveness facilitator Pat Kenner, in October, 2009; results suggested that “working at Iowa” in the College of Education was generally a positive and productive experience. Trends from 2006 to 2008 suggested that the COE had made progress in areas perceived as problematic in 2006, and results suggested areas for improvement. One outcome of the information meeting, supported by Dean Damico, was a call for COE focus groups to explore the top 5 “agreed with” and “disagreed with” statements from the 2008 WAI Survey and to clarify survey outcomes in order to propose strategies to enhance workplace effectiveness in the college. Although COE faculty was invited through the Faculty Advisory Council to participate in focus groups, faculty members were focused on anticipated results from the strategic assessment of graduate student programs, and did not attend the focus groups.

COE Staff Council collaborated with the COE Human Resources (HR) representative, Christine Annicella, and with UI Organizational Effectiveness (OE), specifically Nikole Mac, Pat Kenner, and Jane Holland, to plan the focus group process. The overarching goal of the focus groups was to afford staff an important opportunity to determine if the 2008 WAI results still reflected the most significant concerns in the COE, to indicate if other issues had emerged, and to propose proactive recommendations to achieve maximum effectiveness as well as job satisfaction. Kenner and Holland facilitated the focus groups on February 16, 2010, from 10:30 a.m. to noon. The College of Education Staff Council applied for a Coca Cola grant through the UI Staff Council in order to provide lunch to Focus Group participants and facilitators. The UI Staff Council reviewed the proposal and elected to give 100% financial support as a way to recognize the College of Education Staff Council’s efforts and dedication to the WAI by establishing the WAI Focus Groups for the College of Education.

Nineteen Merit, Merit Exempt, and P&S Staff participated in one of the two concurrent break-out sessions. Two units with a total of 27 staff scheduled their own unit meeting to discuss disaggregated results specific to their unit. However, the 19 participants in the WAI Focus Group represented 25% of the remaining COE Staff. Focus Group participants who were also staff supervisors were discouraged from attending the same focus group as those attended by staff that they supervised. The two groups followed the same outline, and a member of COE Staff Council took notes of the discussion. No individual names were recorded. Staff not able to attend a session, or those who had additional ideas following the focus group discussions, were provided, and took advantage of, the opportunity to contact a councilor or submit anonymous comments through the COE Staff Council website *Suggestion Box*.

Focus Group Themes and Recommendations

Content analysis of the comments from each of the groups uncovered issues and specific concerns, particularly in three of the areas identified as needing improvement at both the University level and within the COE.

When noted, throughout the Focus Group report, the term “supervisor” applies to any employee of the College of Education who has supervisory responsibilities, including Faculty, DEOs, Deans, Unit Directors, P&S, Merit Exempt and Merit staff who supervise students.

Are Work-Related Conflicts Managed Constructively?

Participants clearly articulated ongoing concerns about the constructive management of work-related conflicts, defined as negative interactions resulting from either work style differences, or supervisors or co-workers who interpret effective work styles in different ways. As well, differing personal preferences in the workplace create some of the conflicts in the workplace, as do time constraints and problems with timely job completion. Many of the conflicts arise from poor communication. Expectations between supervisors and employees, between co-workers, or among personnel in different units, are not expressed in effective ways. Conflicts with supervisors often arise when expectations are not clearly and regularly communicated.

Discussion points of note:

- Work-related conflicts are being managed less constructively than in the past, perhaps because of the stress related to budget issues.
- WAI survey results themselves have resulted in increased stress and apparent concerns among supervisors related to discussing the results.
- The COE does not have a clearly articulated system for arbitrating conflict.
- COE Staff members have particular concerns about where to go to discuss conflicts with supervisors.
- Staff members fear retribution if they seek assistance with conflict resolution with supervisors; some have experienced retribution after seeking mediated discussions.
- Many staff believe that workplace conflict has been ignored consistently; this was reported in both surveys, as well as in the recent review of Dean Sandra Damico (although the Dean was not identified as someone who personally caused conflict).
- Workplace bullies are creating an uncivil environment in the COE, and employees have experienced raised voices, insults, and threats.

Concerns:

1. Employees are concerned about confidentiality when taking concerns to HR, and they are afraid of retribution by supervisors.
2. Ineffective communication among supervisors and employees seems to be continuous.
3. Management styles across the COE are very different, and employees do not have a sense of uniformity or norms in resolving conflicts in ways that ensure confidentiality, privacy, and safety.
4. Supervisors often are not effective “managers”; few are trained in appropriate/effective supervisory skills, and although training in related skills is available, few supervisors seem to take advantage of opportunities to learn more in this area.

From the COE Staff Council Suggestion Box

5. “I don’t believe work-related conflicts are managed constructively...in my unit. In fact, there is no ‘management’ of conflicts at all...those in supervisory positions have repeatedly demonstrated an unwillingness to weigh in or to take a stand..., but have instead told the conflicting parties to sort it out....when the behavior constitutes violation of policy, I think it is especially important that supervisors step in and communicate clearly what the expectations are....”

Opportunities for positive change:

- The Dean's office should provide a deadline for supervisors to share WAI results in units with disaggregated results; COE Human Resources, and/or members of the UI Organizational Effectiveness Office can and should help supervisors understand their unit results and provide information about effective ways to use results for building more positive and productive units.
- Provide information to employees about resources to help them better manage conflicts with co-workers and supervisors.
- Create and clearly communicate a process for conflict resolution in the COE; COE Staff Council should create and update easily available information about resources and policies, ensuring that new staff members receive the information.
- Actively encourage (if not mandate) more supervisory skill development, including managing differing work styles as well as workplace conflict.
- Supervisors should be evaluated by staff on a regular basis; COE Staff Council should help develop new and effective college policies related to unit and supervisor evaluations, and advocate for effective policies and implementation.
- Supervisors must step in and communicate clearly what the expectations are in the workplace and the college environment. Work-related conflicts need to be managed constructively. Supervisors must routinely demonstrate a willingness to weigh in or to take a stand and not expect conflicting parties to sort it out when disrespectful or unprofessional conduct is displayed.

Is Poor Performance Managed Appropriately?

Participants had different interpretations of this statement, specifically of what constitutes "poor performance." Some defined "poor performance" as a staff member's inability or failure to fulfill the duties of his or her job to some extent; within this interpretation, a staff member might not finish projects, or the work might be of poor quality. The employee might complete only enjoyable parts of projects, leaving less appealing responsibilities to co-workers. Others viewed "poor performance" as unacceptable personal behavior when dealing with others.

Discussion points of note:

- Perceptions of poor performance might arise because the person's responsibilities might not be fully understood by co-workers who responded to the survey.
- Because roles change over time, current responsibilities might differ from the original job description, creating confusion related to the perception of satisfactory performance.
- New duties might take time away from earlier ones, requiring previous responsibilities to be handled by someone else, encouraging a perception of poor performance.
- Uncertain of the working relationship of Human Resources with supervisors and with staff and how there may be conflicts of interest when everyone is not on the same page or personal relationships get in the way of professional responsibilities.
- The second description dealt more with observed and experienced interpersonal behaviors that showed a lack of respect for others:
 - Supervisors have used bullying tactics to intimidate staff;
 - Co-workers throughout the College of Education have used derogatory language, aggressive behaviors and bullying when conversing with other staff and when discussing someone with a third party

Concerns:

1. When poor performance, including shoddy work, shirking responsibilities, bullying tactics or abusive language, continues without correction they seem to become accepted parts of the culture of the College.
2. New staff members, or staff members exhibiting aggressive and bullying behaviors, may not realize it is inappropriate in our College and campus culture.

Opportunities for positive change:

- Clearly define and communicate job responsibilities and expectations, as well as evaluation criteria, and ensure that responsibilities, expectations, and evaluation criteria are understood by the staff member, the supervisor, and anyone else who might be affected.

- Communicate to all employees of the College that disrespectful behavior is not acceptable by anyone; the need for respectful behavior by supervisors toward employees needs to be communicated as clearly as the expectation for respectful behavior by staff members toward supervisors and co-workers.
- Clearly define a grievance procedure within the COE, including information on rights and responsibilities, and who to contact when issues of disrespectful and/or inappropriate conduct arise.
- Develop and implement a process for formal periodic evaluation of supervisors by staff members, who are assured of confidentiality. Some staff members commented on the opportunity to write feedback to supervisors during their own performance appraisal. Systematic supervisor evaluation needs to go beyond these limited efforts, connected to personal appraisals, and should be implemented in much the same way as the regular evaluation of the Dean.

Are Workloads Distributed Fairly?

The perception that workloads are not distributed fairly may emerge from the differing amounts of work perceived by those with similar or identical job titles. This could be because employees do not know what other positions entail in the way of duties or expectations. Perceptions that workloads are not distributed fairly also could be, in part, a result of the need for more effective communication between staff and those to whom they report (supervisor/ director/DEO) without the fear of retribution. Employees perceive that when work is completed satisfactorily and on time, additional work is “granted” to that staff member: the “reward for doing a great job....more work”. As well, staff described specific examples of co-workers who failed to complete work or failed to do it well, and supervisors reassigning that work to someone who completes their work well and can manage multiple tasks simultaneously. The philosophy in some areas seems to be that if you want something done well, you give it to the busiest staff member, and the perception is that this is occurring more and more frequently with staff in the COE.

Discussion points of note:

- Employees do not know each other’s job responsibilities; “autonomy” to do one’s job may be used as protection to obscure whether roles are fulfilled completely or not.
- Supervisors may create an environment where staff members need to do the best job they can and not worry about supporting others or the unit.
- The concept of providing support has many different facets, not always apparent to staff or to the supervisor in the same unit.
- Some supervisors do not understand COGS and AFSCME well enough to work effectively with these populations; rather than learn more about union agreements, they avoid conflicts with unionized employees, increasing perceptions of unfair workloads.
- Employees want supervisors to build culture of positive, competent staff and a “team approach” when needing to complete work and meet deadlines in a unit; they want supervisors to establish boundaries but not barriers.
- Employees perceive that some have more extensive workloads than others or have greater time constraints than others, and this led to specific questions related to service.
- Some employees serve extensively on College or University committees, and others question how they can complete their own college job responsibilities and still be absent given the number of committee meetings they attend or committee work they produce. Discussions included questions about the relationship and value to the College for committee service.
- Do all supervisors within the COE value service on committees and provide equal time and support for staff to serve (including staff from the categories of Merit, Merit Exempt and P&S).
- Is P&S service on committees valued in the same way as service by the faculty?
- When work on committees is not directly related to employee work in the COE, is the committee work valued? Is it clear that the employee appropriately values their own COE responsibilities?
- How much is too much committee work? What is the expected balance between work and service for staff?

Concerns:

1. Why don't staff members feel comfortable enough to tell their supervisors that they can't handle extra responsibilities and increasing workloads?
 - a. Employees fear that this would reflect negatively on their commitment to their jobs, perhaps limiting opportunities for advancement;
 - b. Employees fear retribution.
2. Early retirement policies may exacerbate this issue, with fewer people remaining to share the workload.
3. Some staff are not allowed to serve on committees while others are, sometimes even in the same units, and this is perceived as an unfair practice among staff.
4. Employees expressed fear that COE staff will be pushed to the limit; employees do not feel that they can provide input on workload parameters or even on specific deadlines.
5. Some faculty members are not productive, and required staff support for those individuals increase the feeling that workloads are not fairly distributed.
6. Staff and Faculty are not compensated equally for extra workload. Example provided: faculty member receives extra compensation for teaching one class when staff do not.

Opportunities for positive change:

- The new Compensation and Classification structure under design, based on recently completed Job Information Forms (JIF), may change workplace expectations and perceptions of workplace parity.
- Ongoing job training could be provided within the COE so that new skill sets could be acquired and workloads shared.
- Implement a process to help staff balance work and service through University and College committees. Provide guidelines. Evaluate the benefit to the COE for service on committees not directly aligned with the employees' role in the COE.
- Empower, train and expect employees to use technology, (i.e., databases, list serves), universally. Work with the COE Data Analyst and tech department to determine workplace needs (equipment and databases) in a unit in order to develop new strategies for using and sharing data. Staff and supervisors attend college-wide presentations, demonstrating the use of new technology; share how units might work to review their needs and discover new methods for working effectively and efficiently.
- Supervisors learn more about and understand union mandates and constraints related to those employees who are organized through AFSCME or COGS in order to disperse workloads fairly.
- To promote both equitable workload distribution and enhanced perceptions of equitable workload distribution, implement a system for staff evaluations of both supervisors and units. All staff within any unit should be provided the opportunity to evaluate both supervisors and their workplaces, and they should be encouraged to make recommendations. COE Staff Council could assist COE HR with developing appropriate tools for this process.

Two additional themes

The 2008 WAI results identified two additional areas for improvement; although these areas did not generate subsequent themes in the same way as the other areas, budget status and confidence in a clear plan to strengthen the University also were discussed.

Information about my unit's budget:

Many staff members in the COE disagreed with the statement that they were clearly informed about their unit's budget status, but they did not necessarily consider this to be an area of concern. Although some COE staff members have budgetary responsibility in their units, and are involved with ongoing budget updates, others do not have budgetary responsibilities and see no need to be more informed. Staff members noted that the Dean has been providing more detailed information to the COE and that this is very helpful in times of general financial uncertainty and discussed the need for more transparency in this area to define how budget allocation among all academic, research and service units support the mission statement of the college and make it stronger.

Confidence in a clear plan to strengthen the University:

Staff members strongly felt that the overall situation at The University of Iowa has changed dramatically since the 2008 WAI survey was completed; the current budget crisis might propel issues associated with funding toward the top of staff concerns if the survey were repeated today. Staff noted that the delay in receiving the results of the 2008 WAI survey may have diminished confidence in the effectiveness of planning for workplace effectiveness. Future survey results must be disseminated more quickly. Finally, Provost Loh visited the COE, and the information that he shared with the College was well received, giving many staff members more confidence in central administration. In addition, Provost Loh met individually with the COE Staff Council asking for nominees to serve on the Provost's Dean Search Committee. This continues to validate the importance of shared governance in our college and on our campus.

Conclusions

As part of the University's "continuous improvement cycle to help the University achieve its goals for excellence: assess, prioritize and act on survey results, measure progress" (http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/survey_report_final.pdf), the COE focus groups elucidated WAI results disaggregated for the COE. Positive trends from 2006 to 2008 are apparent when comparing COE survey results from the two years. Significant staff concerns from the 2008 survey, however, provide important opportunities to enhance job satisfaction, employee efficacy, and both unit and college workplace effectiveness. As noted in a recent report about employee surveys (Gurchiek, 2007), in addition to sharing results with employees and conducting focus groups to clarify findings, results must be linked directly to the organization through action plans and employee recommendations for addressing findings.

Staff members report high levels of anxiety about incivility and disrespectful conduct—even bullying—in the COE. Not only do they report workplace conflict among co-workers, but also inappropriate conduct by supervisors toward employees. Although over 90 percent of respondents in the COE reported that they could "go to someone to discuss inappropriate behavior without fear of negative consequences," a review of results disaggregated by role explains the apparent contradiction. Over 94 percent of faculty agrees with this statement. The statement does **not** appear in either the top 10 "agreed with" statements for merit staff or the top 6 "agreed with" statements for Professional and Scientific or Merit-Exempt (PSME) staff. Staff members are particularly uncertain where to turn when they are not treated respectfully by supervisors or colleagues, and they fear retribution if they seek arbitration. Staff members express concern that bullying, as well as unresolved examples of poor workplace effectiveness may become part of the institutional culture in the College, in spite of the existing commitment on the part of the University to deter the creation of hostile work environments (*University of Iowa Operations Manual*).

More effective communication is clearly key to the resolution of some staff concerns. Better delineation of responsibilities and expectations may lead to more realistic perceptions of others' roles, as well as to greater clarity among staff members and supervisors. A clearly articulated policy on conflict resolution, as well as available resources for the positive management of workplace conflict, would directly address the unease apparent in the focus groups. Employees need to have greater confidence that reports of workplace bullying will yield positive results and will stop inappropriate behavior. The *Operations Manual* states that "supervisors will establish and maintain standards for collaborative interaction among peers and employees that is characterized by respect, honesty, and service, and will constructively manage conflict as it occurs" (*University of Iowa Operations Manual*, Chapter 16: Ethics and Responsibilities for University of Iowa Staff, 16.4, c, [4]), but staff believe this needs to be effectively operationalized in the COE.

Although over 92 percent of COE employees report that their "unit has flexibility to allow me to participate in UI-sponsored committees," staff members in the focus groups reported uncertainty about the expectations, policies, and College norms related to staff service through University and College committees; clarity across units would mitigate against avoidable misunderstandings. As well, the disaggregated results again suggest differences apparent among respondents. While over 93 percent of PSME and over 90 percent of faculty agree that their units provide such flexibility, the statement does not appear in the top 10 "agreed with" statements for merit staff. If

merit staff have little understanding of the role of committees in the life of the College or the University, they may well feel absences for committee meetings are one way to avoid necessary College responsibilities.

Staff members in the COE focus groups would like to see fundamental shifts in College procedures that would ensure that supervisors have greater accountability for workplace effectiveness. Although the Dean is regularly evaluated by staff as well as faculty, staff have very little or no opportunity to evaluate supervisors at any level, including DEOs and unit directors. The COE needs to implement a system of supervisory evaluation, and the College needs to collaborate with the Provost's office to ensure that units are evaluated as recommended in the *Operations Manual*. As well, supervisors would benefit from a clearly articulated expectation that they take advantage of easily accessible resources to enhance their communication and managerial skills.

Recommendations

Based on serious staff concerns, Dean Damico should establish an ad hoc committee, comprised of COE Human Resources, members of the COE Staff Council, and members of the COE Supervisory groups, before the end of spring semester. This committee should meet during June and July to clearly delineate goals associated with concerns and opportunities for positive change, as well as appropriate objectives and performance indicators. The committee should develop an action plan, including objectives, activities, timelines, party(ies) responsible for each objective, strategies, and necessary resources. The COE Staff Council feels confident that Dean Damico could develop the impetus for change, establishing important precedents for the future. Outcomes will be measured in the next WAI survey or sooner if new college survey instruments are developed and implemented in the college.

The results of the most recent 2008 WAI survey clearly portray the College of Education as an energetic workplace, comprised of talented professionals who, without exception, seek the most effective ways to do their work. The focus groups spotlighted areas for improvement in the workplace environment as well as for the overall health of our college. Commitment to these goals will contribute to a more positive and productive working environment, resulting in greater employee satisfaction and efficacy, particularly important in the current challenging economic climate.

References

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Appendix 1. 2006 Working at Iowa (WAI) Survey

In 2006, The University of Iowa undertook the first Working at Iowa (WAI) survey, asking staff and faculty how they feel about their work environment. In the 2006 instrument, staff and faculty were asked how they experienced their work environment, both locally and with the University. As reported on the University WAI Webpage (<http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/purpose.html>), the survey enabled the University to:

- Discover the strengths of the University work environment and what areas to target for continuous improvement.
- Identify ways to continue promoting faculty and staff engagement.
- Collect baseline data for future comparisons.

University WAI Results: 2006

Based on an overall participation rate of 42.6 percent, strengths identified in the 2006 survey noted that staff and faculty generally:

- look for more effective ways to do their work.
- know what is expected of them relative to their job.
- understand how their job fits into the overall mission of the UI.
- have a strong focus on providing excellent service.
- have the basic resources to do their job.

Areas identified by faculty and staff as needing improvement University-wide included:

- managing poor performance appropriately.
- being informed of the workplace budget status.
- managing work-related conflicts constructively.
- distributing workloads fairly.
- having a clear plan to strengthen the UI.

College of Education WAI Results: 2006

Faculty and staff from the College of Education (COE) participated in the 2006 WAI survey at a rate exceeding that of the University, with 53 percent of all employees completing the instrument. Strengths identified in the COE 2006 survey noted that in general terms:

- staff and faculty look for more effective ways to do their work, although the rate was 88 percent, compared to 99 percent for the University as a whole.
- faculty and staff feel they have the flexibility to serve on UI sponsored committees (82 percent).
- faculty felt respected (79 percent).
- staff and faculty have the basic resources to do their job, although the rate was 79 percent, compared to 90 percent for the University as a whole).
- faculty and staff know what is expected of them in their jobs (77 percent).

Areas identified by COE staff and faculty as needing improvement included:

- managing poor performance appropriately (49 percent, compared to 45 percent for the University as a whole).
- managing work-related conflicts constructively (42 percent, compared to 36 percent for the University as a whole).
- being informed of the workplace budget status (40 percent, compared to 38 percent for the University as a whole).
- receiving feedback at annual reviews to help employees improve performance (37 percent).
- confidence in leadership vision (36 percent).

Outcomes from 2006

The University Website provides access to the complete 2006 results for the University (<http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/waireport06.pdf>), as well as to a progress report provided in summer 2007 (http://www.uiowa.edu/hr/working/update_jul07.pdf). The College of Education provides College results at <http://www.education.uiowa.edu/coedean/coehr.htm>. Results from the initial WAI survey led to action steps reported at both the University and unit level, including:

- tracking the timeliness of performance reviews and offering workshops to improve the quality of performance conversations and goal setting;
- partnering Human Resources with the Office of the UI Ombudsperson to offer conflict management to specific work groups;
- offering business process improvement and workplace consultation to address workload concerns; and
- targeting supervisory effectiveness as an area for improvement, and offering more training opportunities for supervisors.