

Concept Paper

Goal 5: The Community of the UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine

Background: Many organizations recognize that a strong sense of community among members is important in achieving their vision, mission, and goals. As illustrated under the “National Trends / External Picture” heading below, high employee satisfaction, retention, and many other benefits accrue to organizations that create, foster, and maintain what social psychologists define as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together."¹

While exploring the theoretical or psychological basis for the need for community is beyond the scope of this paper, business researchers, authors of management literature related to organizational behavior, as well as organizations themselves increasingly recognize the power of community as it relates to achieving business goals. In a 2008 article in the Harvard Business Review² Ed Catmull, president of Pixar, states that the enterprise is successful mainly because it has created and fosters a “vibrant community where talented people are loyal to one another and their collective work, everyone feels that they are part of something extraordinary, and their passion and accomplishments make the community a magnet for talented people coming out of schools or working at other places.” This is the sentiment recognized by many organizations and our own SVM Strategic Planning Task Force which, during its meeting on Oct 9, 2017, identified "People" as a key issue and one of the proposed major goals (Goal 5) of our strategic plan.

Incorporating a disciplined and concentrated effort in the fostering of a sense of community as a major strategy for the School will differentiate our plan and enable us to maintain our position at the forefront of veterinary medical education and veterinary science. The success of the first four proposed goals for our strategic plan will be critically dependent on our fifth goal of ensuring the welfare, satisfaction, mentoring and retention of faculty and staff. In turn, all five goals will require the creation and maintenance of a strong sense of community. Development of organizational behavior recognizes that an organization’s culture is the manifestation of the systems and processes through which the organization manages, motivates, empowers, mentors - and ultimately satisfies and retains (or fails to satisfy and retain) its people. As such, it is paramount to identify and focus on the systems and processes necessary to create a culture that fosters a sincere and strong universal sense of community among the members of the School. Employing this strategy and others, we can ensure the welfare, satisfaction, mentoring and retention of excellent faculty and staff.

¹ McMillan, D. W. and Chavis, D. M. (1986), Sense of community: A definition and theory. J. Community Psychol., 14: 6–23. doi:10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:1<6::AID-JCOP2290140103>3.0.CO;2-I

² <https://hbr.org/2008/09/how-pixar-fosters-collective-creativity>

National Trends / External Picture: Research shows that many of the companies with low rates of employee turnover attribute much of their success to the creation and fostering of a sense of community or a culture of “people first.” A common theme³ among low employee-turnover companies such as CarMax, Schwab, Hyatt, Inchcape, Mars, Netflix, Clif Bar, and Whole Foods is a concentrated effort to invest time and resources in employee programs. These programs include formalization of employee training and recognition, rewarding employees who exemplify the desired culture, and constant communication and celebration of shared values throughout the organization. In many ways, these programs aimed at retaining employees may be viewed as tactics deployed to achieve a strategic goal of low turnover. This is an important lens for our discussion, as achieving a desired culture and/or a sense of community within an organization will not happen unless the organization focuses upon those goals, and encourages and rewards employees who help develop and implement them.

Research also shows that meaningful promotion is a primary factor in employee retention, and career advancement appears to be as important as company culture. In one HBR study, advancement and culture were far better predictors of retention than were the quality of senior leadership or the concept of work-life balance.⁴ Career advancement as a factor of employee retention at the SVM, then, may be one to consider, especially for staff. However, for faculty, the COACHE survey indicates that satisfaction with the clarity, fairness, and standards for tenure and promotion to full professor is higher at UC Davis than at the five other research institutions (four public, one private) with which UC Davis was most closely compared. If meaningful promotion and culture are the primary factors in reducing employee turnover, focusing on the development of a strong culture of community is the clearest opportunity available to achieve this goal, at least for faculty.

Strategic Themes: Ensuring the welfare, satisfaction, mentoring, and retention of faculty and staff at the SVM relates in part to the creation of a strong sense of community, but there may also be further strategies to pursue towards achieving interrelated goals. While work/life balance may not necessarily be a great predictor of employee retention, the subject arises often during discussions of employee satisfaction and is related to staff and faculty burn-out. In the current SVM culture, it is often assumed that working long hours and sacrificing personal time in pursuit of the goals of the organization is necessary for recognition of achievement and/or advancement. An ever-increasing burden of compliance and a demonstrable trend of decreasing direct administrative support for faculty contribute to an increasing work burden for both faculty and staff. While there is growing awareness of the need for work/life balance, and that neglecting the “life” side of work/life balance is unhealthy, the demands of the work are perceived to be continually increasing, compromising employee wellness and lessening satisfaction.

³ <https://www.tinypulse.com/blog/employee-retention-examples>

⁴ <https://hbr.org/2017/03/why-do-employees-stay-a-clear-career-path-and-good-pay-for-starters>

Succession planning is a second strategic theme the task force identified when considering the SVM community. This theme is somewhat related to the principle of meaningful promotion and clear career progression mentioned above, but stability and predictability are clearly important to employees and to the SVM independent of other factors. As the HR Council puts it, “Effective succession planning supports organizational stability and sustainability by ensuring there is an established process to meet staffing requirements. Boards and executive directors can demonstrate leadership by having the strategies and processes in place to ensure that these transitions occur smoothly, with little disruption to the organization.”⁵

The final strategic theme related to the creation of a strong(er) sense of community in the SVM, identified by the task force, is related to distinctions made between groups within the organization’s constituents, including faculty and staff eg. Academic Senate versus Academic Federation, and Staff Veterinarians versus Academic (departmental) hires. If a true sense of community is to be created and nurtured in an organization where two or more distinct classes of employees exist, it will require the same level of attention and dedication in addressing these distinctions as is given to creating a sense of community in the first place. If, as a community, we decide that all members are equally important (in terms of wellness, satisfaction, mentoring, and retention), we must place equal emphasis on staff and faculty training and recognition, rewards to those who exemplify the desired culture, and constant communication and celebration of desired values throughout the organization. Our objective needs to be the building of a championship team, as opposed to building a team of champions.

Capacity to Execute:

The task force identified several strengths and weaknesses of the SVM as they relate to this goal, and these qualities will inform the strategic planning process and the ability to ensure the welfare, satisfaction, mentoring and retention of faculty and staff.

Strengths:

- SVM has been executing its existing strategic plan extremely well, and it already has a framework in place to ensure that measurable outcomes are developed, tracked and celebrated;
- SVM encourages collaboration, including international partnerships;
- SVM has a critical mass of faculty that attracts top talent compared to other institutions, the availability of professional reinforcement being considered a significant benefit by many;
- UC system of shared governance enfranchises people;
- SVM in general has good facilities, but they are not necessarily evenly distributed across the School (some units have significantly better facilities than others);
- SVM has made significant strides in mentoring both (junior) faculty and staff (but still has room for improvement);

⁵ <http://hrcouncil.ca/hr-toolkit/planning-succession.cfm>

- There is appreciation by the administration of work/life balance - and the SVM ensures the flexibility to help this happen; *and*
- There are improving resources and networks to foster staff advancement - department managers and heads meet with staff and outline individual development plans. UC Davis is also increasing the availability of web portals to assist in career advancement.

Challenges:

- It is impossible to be all things to all people and remain excellent at ALL those things. Prioritization is required, otherwise we become more reactive than proactive, and people assume duties they may not necessarily be best suited for;
- Units within the SVM appear successful at identifying core strengths and building on those strengths (with people being the most important component); however, this type of prioritization appears more difficult to achieve on a holistic, school-wide basis; *and*
- Faculty leveraging of outside job offers, with no real intent to leave, consumes a lot of both faculty and staff time, effort and resources and can also be divisive.

Clearly, this is not an exhaustive list of strengths and weaknesses of the SVM, but again, these traits will inform the best strategies and tactics to meet our goals.

Short and Long Term Plans:

Recognition from the broader strategic planning committee that creation of a strong(er) sense of community will aid in meeting all five strategic goals being proposed is likely the most immediate need. A recognition by SVM leadership that nurturing organizational culture and sense of community is a strategy like any other - that is, one for which clear, measurable strategies can be developed, and to which resources and planning must be dedicated - will be crucial to its incorporation into the larger plan.

Development of strategies and employee programs that include focus on how each program contributes to a stronger sense of community for all involved will be essential. Building and maintaining a strong sense of community must be included in all strategies we choose to deploy for goal five. For instance, small, measurable tactics like the use or non-use of formal titles in SVM communications for both faculty and staff can be built upon to create more robust initiatives that foster a sense of community.

Recognition of the need for building a very strong sense of community within the SVM may be the most obvious short-term plan, but as many organizations and strategic planners know, it is during the implementation phase of strategic planning where goals often stagnate.⁶ Thoughtful energy from everyone involved must be used to develop tactics, systems, and processes that

⁶ <https://www.forbes.com/sites/aileron/2011/11/30/10-reasons-why-strategic-plans-fail/#67f3892086a8>

align to reward and celebrate the desired goals. Leadership and management must walk the walk of the developed strategies and tactics, setting the example for everyone else within the organization; and employees must see tangible benefits in participating.

Projected Costs:

The cost of implementation is incorporated within many of the current programs the School has created or supports via its base budgets. To fully accomplish this goal new resources will need to be developed or created. Costs will be dependent upon the scope of the program and sustainability of the resource or program created. New sources of funds should be developed from philanthropy, industry partners, government programs, and academic partners. Grants and gifts to support well-conceived programs will be competitive for extramural resources.