

School and Departmental Resources to Enhance Staff Belonging and Engagement

Practice Overview

Program Name	Great People Work Here
Practice	Series of schoolwide engagement events, staff recognition communications and awards, and departmental efforts to improve a sense of belonging.
Participants	All Emory School of Medicine employees, with certain activities specifically for staff.
Frequency	Continuous throughout the year.
Modality	In-person.
Resources	Budgeted dean's office funds for schoolwide events, administrative time.

Introduction

Emory University School of Medicine has improved staff engagement and retention through the implementation of a multitiered approach to increasing a sense of belonging within the organization. The Great People Work Here program was initiated in 2022 in response to results of a staff engagement survey which showed room for improvement in this area. The program combines schoolwide initiatives with a department-level action planning framework, involving leadership teams from across the dean's office, clinical and basic science departments, and health care partners from the school's physician division.

Goals and Objectives

The objective of the Great People Work Here initiative is to improve staff sense of belonging as measured by their annual engagement survey. The school strategically identified sense of belonging as a primary area for action planning given its correlation with other engagement and retention outcomes. While the Great People Work Here initiative applies to everyone, there has been intentional focus on the value of staff at the school.

"Ultimately what we want to be able to do is to support the people that are delivering on our mission," said Cliff Teague, executive administrator in human resources.

Promising Practice Overview

The comprehensive program addresses belonging through a multitiered approach that incorporates schoolwide belonging efforts with department-level action planning based on engagement survey data.

To guide efforts at the school-level, the dean's office convened a Staff Recognition and Engagement Committee. This committee works with leadership, human resources, and the Office of Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion to develop programming and initiatives designed to improve staff sense of belonging.

"We are organized around a staff recognition and engagement committee, which actually serves as an incubator for ideas and initiatives that we then float up to dean's office leadership," said Teague.

To date, the Staff Recognition and Engagement Committee leads a variety of initiatives designed to promote sense of belonging, including:

- New, strategic communication tools that highlight staff contributions to the tripartite mission of academic medicine.
- Increased staff recognition through an annual staff awards program.
- Enhanced appreciation events for staff, including Staff Appreciation Week, extended from the previous one-day event, DEI week, and Health Expo, all of which are held annually.
- Increased opportunities for professional development, including an annual professional development event held in combination with the Health Expo.

At a local level, Emory School of Medicine empowers department leadership to increase belonging by providing improved access to engagement survey data, trusting department leaders to know what will work best in their own department, and facilitating cross-pollination of ideas.

"We all have the same goal, the finish line we are trying to cross, but we can take different paths to get there. ... The dean's office recognizes that, and they let us do that really well," said Zirka Smith, senior administrator, department of ophthalmology.

To help each department assess and set priorities, the school developed a data analytics tool that breaks down engagement survey data at the departmental level, allowing the department leaders to see data for their department by employee type. The department leaders use these data to develop action plans specific to their own department's needs and culture. Additionally, department leadership attend an annual Best Practices Workshop that highlights departments that have had successes. This event facilitates the cross-pollination of ideas and concepts and allows departments to learn from each other.

The department of ophthalmology is one unit that experienced successful action planning efforts. Their tactics include:

- **Reliable communications.** Improved consistency of messaging from leadership and implementing daily huddles and bimonthly meetings.
- **Enhanced career development opportunities.** Workshops, lecture series, prioritized staff hires, and implementation of a technician progression plan.
- **Increased recognition and celebration.** Leader and peer-to-peer recognition, monthly birthday celebrations, holiday potlucks, and annual staff awards.
- **Elevating the employee voice.** Reengaged the department-level Employee Engagement Council.

Results and Impact

Collectively, the actions taken at the school and department levels have resulted in significant increases in the sense of belonging among staff. On the most recent staff engagement survey in 2023, the school of medicine achieved a 7-percentage-point increase from the prior year for the statement “I feel like I belong in this organization.” In addition, they have also seen an overall increase in survey participation over previous years, which is another sign of trust in and engagement with the school.

Individual departments also saw improved results. For example, ophthalmology observed an increase from 46% in 2021 to 73% in 2023 in the proportion of staff who responded favorably to the belonging indicator. In addition, the above efforts yielded staff retention improvements of almost 50%. This improved retention combined with new hires resulted in a 20% increase in the overall number of staff employed in the department.

Resources Needed

The Great People Work Here program is a combination of larger events and initiatives that require funding and smaller initiatives that only require limited resources and are often led by volunteers. Larger events such as Staff Appreciation Week, DEI week, and the Health Expo are supported through dean's office budgeting. Additionally, departments are allocated funding from the dean's office to sponsor events during Staff Appreciation Week.

At the local level, departments are responsible for budgeting for their own engagement initiatives throughout the year. In the department of ophthalmology, for example, dedicated funds are set aside for engagement activities, but much of what they do is very low cost and mostly only requires time.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

Responding to the results of a staff engagement survey can be challenging. The team at Emory School of Medicine offered the following advice for schools that aim to take on lasting, meaningful culture change:

- **Keep things simple.** Choose one tangible area to improve as opposed to focusing on numerous areas.
- **Give departments autonomy.** Each department has a sense of its own specific opportunities for change and is best equipped to select individual areas for improvement.
- **Provide departments support.** Rather than asking departments to report on their action planning progress, schools can support departments by providing an action planning framework and timely data to monitor changes over time.
- **Be nimble and update plans accordingly.** Continue to assess what people need and use the data to adapt implemented interventions.
- **Pull people into the process.** Staff input has been critical to developing the activities and programs designed to improve belonging.

Moving Forward

Emory School of Medicine plans to continue to use the results of the annual staff engagement survey to assess their efforts and develop new action plans based on the results.

Acknowledgements

This case study is based on a July 29, 2024, interview conducted with Cliff Teague, executive administrator of human resources and Zirka Smith, MPH, DrPH, senior administrator in the department of ophthalmology at Emory School of Medicine.

Medical School Statistics

Name of Institution	Emory University School of Medicine
Location	Atlanta, Georgia
School Size as of 2023:	
Number of medical students	652 ^{1*}
Number of full-time faculty	3,030 ²
Number of staff	3,178 ³
Public/Private	Private

* Enrollment includes the number of students in medical school, including students on a leave of absence, on Oct. 31 of each year shown. Enrollment does not include students with graduated, dismissed, withdrawn, deceased, never enrolled, completed fifth pathway, did not complete fifth pathway, or degree revoked statuses.

¹Source: AAMC. Student Record System. 2023. <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/students-residents/report/student-records-system-srs>

²Source: AAMC. *U.S. Medical School Faculty, 2023*. AAMC; 2024.

³Source: Emory University. Woodruff Health Sciences Center At a glance 2023. <https://whsc.emory.edu/includes/documents/sections/publications/at-a-glance-2023.pdf>

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