

Full-Day Staff Development Program to Strengthen Engagement and Build Community

Practice Overview

Practice Name:	Northwestern University's Feinberg Forward Staff Development Program
Description:	To strengthen engagement and foster community, the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine developed an annual, full-day professional development event for staff that includes interactive sessions, peer-to-peer learning, and staff-led workshops.
Participants:	Mid- to senior-level administrative staff, with a threshold set by employee grade level
Frequency:	One full-day event per year, with additional shorter learning opportunities throughout the year
Modality:	In-person
Resources:	Financial investment from the Dean's Office and staff time

Introduction

Feinberg Forward is an annual, full-day professional development event for mid- to senior-level staff designed to strengthen engagement and foster community. Launched in 2022 in response to staff feedback gathered through leadership lunches and engagement surveys, the program was designed to address a perceived gap in training, knowledge sharing, and cross-departmental collaboration. The program was initiated by the Staff Engagement Committee, supported by the Dean's Office, and designed by the Feinberg Forward Workgroup, a group of nominated staff from across the school, using a "by staff, for staff" philosophy. It is a full-day, on-site professional development event that includes interactive sessions, peer-to-peer learning, and staff-led workshops.

Goals and Objectives

The goals of the Feinberg Forward program are to:

- Promote cross-department collaboration and knowledge sharing.
- Empower staff through peer learning.
- Develop continuous improvement and innovation.
- Encourage a culture of engagement and participation.

Promising Practice Overview

The program is a full-day, in-person, invitation-only event held on-site. The morning and early afternoon portion of the program is designed for mid- to senior-level administrative staff (e.g., department administrators, associate department administrators, financial administrators, clinical operations managers, research administrators, etc.) and includes a kickoff plenary session followed by two concurrent breakout sessions and lunch. The plenary session features an invited speaker, typically from Northwestern's business school, and is focused on leadership and organizational development, setting a tone, theme, and vision for the participants. The concurrent breakout sessions feature invited speakers internal to the school of medicine to share best practices, process improvements, and other topics identified by staff. All content is generated internally, with presenters drawn from across the medical school's departments, centers, and institutes. Presenters range from senior administrators to hourly staff with subject-matter expertise, reinforcing the program's "by staff, for staff" philosophy. The planning process emphasizes peer-to-peer learning, with a focus on practical advanced knowledge and innovations developed within the Feinberg community. Sessions are designed to showcase innovations, tools, and practices developed within departments and centers, creating a platform for knowledge-sharing across the school. Ensuring the topics are identified by staff, rather than using a top-down approach, has been a key component of the program's success.

"It is not Dean's Office run; It's been a success because we've had so much feedback and input from the community as to what it is that they want to see."

— Kathleen Dunne Balducci, MBA, director of dean's operations

To broaden impact and develop emerging talent, the afternoon session, "Feinberg Future," incorporates a plus-one model, where core participants (the morning attendees) each nominate a junior staff member to attend. This portion of the program includes a broader range of tactical and strategic learning opportunities with topics that apply to all levels of staff. The event culminates with a networking reception and resource fair featuring representatives from school and university clubs, groups, and programs (e.g., research administration organization, HR programs, etc.).

In response to the broad demand for the Feinberg Forward programming, the Feinberg Forward Workgroup has identified ways to expand its reach beyond the one-day event. They developed an internal landing page on their website that includes key information and takeaways, as well as resources from the programming such as handouts, slide decks, and recordings available to anyone with a Feinberg login. In addition, they created the Feinberg Forward Expanding Staff Knowledge series, monthly in-person learning and working sessions offered throughout the year. The learning sessions feature topics from Feinberg Forward that are beneficial to a larger audience as well as sessions on new and timely topics. The working sessions focus on specific activities or tools that attendees work on in groups to share best practices and learn from each other. Working sessions have featured topics such as Microsoft Planner, SharePoint, and Teams.

"There's such an appetite for knowledge, to network, to come together at the school... I think it's absolutely fantastic."

— Melanie Michelle Mkrdichian, associate director of research administration

Results and Impact

Feinberg Forward has successfully increased staff engagement and created a culture of collaboration, learning, and empowerment within the Feinberg community, as demonstrated by increased attendance and engagement in the program, as well as post-event survey data. Since its launch in 2022 with 150 participants, Feinberg Forward grew to over 300 participants in 2024. The number of staff submitting session proposals has increased over this period as well.

In post-event surveys, participants have consistently rated the event as “Good” or “Excellent” across all categories, including learning sessions, overall experiences, and community building. Staff feedback has highlighted the program’s value in fostering community and motivation.

Resources Needed

Feinberg Forward is supported through institutional funding and volunteer staff effort. The Dean’s Office supports the program through the Staff Engagement Committee’s annual budget, which covers core expenses such as catering and a small honorarium for the plenary speaker. The event is hosted on-site to minimize costs related to space and audiovisual setup.

Feinberg Forward and the associated programs are run by a workgroup comprised of staff nominated by the school’s Staff Engagement Committee. The Feinberg Forward Workgroup is responsible for planning the event, generating content, identifying speakers, serving as liaisons to speakers, and communicating and coordinating other event logistics. The workgroup includes 12 staff members and meets every month.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

The program has been a large success, but the Feinberg team emphasized that nothing is perfect the first time around, and there are always challenges and opportunities for improvement. The team highlighted some insights that could be helpful for other schools interested in developing a similar program:

- **Engage staff from across the organization, not just the usual suspects.** By having members of the Staff Engagement Committee nominate Feinberg Forward Workgroup members, Feinberg has been able to engage a new group of staff.
- **You can't meet everyone's needs.** Define your audience and stay focused.
- **Provide opportunities for staff to contribute and present, regardless of position.** There are people at various career levels who have content expertise. Having a dynamic mix of people present and share their knowledge enriches the conversation with diverse perspectives.
- **Offer breakout sessions more than once.** When there are concurrent sessions, participants may miss out on something they want to attend. Providing multiple opportunities expands participation and broadens impact.
- **Just try.** If there is something your staff are interested in and have an appetite for, it is worth trying.

“If there’s an appetite and a desire for you to try, that’s always better than not doing anything.”
 — Melanie Michelle Mkrdichian, associate director of research administration

Moving Forward

Feinberg Forward plans to expand participation and improve sessions by offering tracks based on experience level or job function and increasing representation at the resource fair. The team is also exploring hybrid options for working sessions and creative solutions to space and budget constraints.

Acknowledgements

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Medical School Statistics

Name of Institution:	Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine
Location:	Chicago, Illinois
School Size as of 2024:	
Number of medical students:	719 ¹
Number of full-time faculty:	2,202 ²
Number of staff:	2,634 ³
Public/Private:	Private

¹Source: 2024 AAMC Student Record System. 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.

²Source: AAMC. Faculty Roster: U.S. Medical School Faculty, 2024; <https://www.aamc.org/data-reports/faculty-institutions/report/faculty-roster-us-medical-school-faculty>. Accessed Aug. 1, 2025.

³Source: Campbell H. Presented at: Feinberg Annual Staff Town Hall; Dec. 11, 2024; Chicago, IL.

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