**UND Strategic Planning Valuing and Supporting UND Employees Workgroup Report**

**August 31, 2022**

**Executive Summary**

What does it mean to feel valued and supported as an employee at UND? This question has driven the work of the 2022 Valuing and Supporting UND Employees (VASE) strategic planning workgroup. Led by co-chairs Becca Bergee (Director of Human Resources for Academic Affairs) and Liz Legerski (Associate Professor, Department of Sociology), about 15 UND employees and several community stakeholders met biweekly from April 29 to August 18, 2022, to explore how we might work to include a pillar related to valuing and supporting employees in UND’s next strategic plan. The members of our workgroup included current and former UND employees working in areas ranging from facilities to finance to faculty. They have many years of experience “on the ground,” and in some cases even as students, at UND. They are experts in employee development, human resources, and management. Over the course of our group’s work, we talked to or reviewed responses from over 100 UND employees and stakeholders who participated in strategic planning focus groups. A number of reoccurring themes emerged in our discussions, which inform our recommendations below.

We also gathered and reviewed literature on the challenges of retaining and supporting employees in higher education, especially in the “post-Covid” era. Employees today want flexibility and value work-life balance. Many organizations are competing with colleges for talent and are often able to provide more competitive pay. Institutions of higher education are in the business of human development. What if we could apply the same principles and programs for student development and retention to all our employees? Although we did not find many examples of higher ed institutions dedicating entire segments of their strategic plans to addressing employee issues, it is not uncommon to find goals related to supporting diverse employee recruitment, retention, and development within various components of strategic plans. This represents a valuable opportunity for UND to do something innovative in higher education planning.

***We aspire for UND to be the premier employer of our region – a place where people want to work and stay.***UND’s employees are vital to achieving our mission and goals. When our employees are successful and thriving, our students, local communities, and state benefit. By dedicating a segment of UND’s strategic plan to the well-being, development, and support of employees – including faculty, staff, and student employees – UND would be demonstrating their commitment to the notion of “leaders in action” by being a national leader in this area. Below we identify several areas of focus related to employees that the SPC ought to consider when developing their proposal for UND’s next strategic plan.

**Key Themes**

**Theme 1: We must recruit and retain a robust work force to accomplish UND’s goals**

1.1. How do we accomplish this?

1.1.1. Provide competitive compensation and benefits, including opportunities for life partner considerations

1.1.2. Establish a meaningful and informative orientation to campus and the greater Grand Forks community and bolster existing onboarding programs to continue to engage and support all employees

1.1.3. Provide and value meaningful opportunities for job development and lifelong learning across all units

1.1.4. Support the work-life balance, health and well-being of all employees

1.1.5. Provide flexible and adaptive work arrangements where and when possible

1.2. What challenges are present?

1.2.1. The high cost of benefits; in some cases (for example, when both life partners work at UND) employees might prefer a higher cash compensation

1.2.2. The timing of start dates and urgency to fill positions can impede thoughtful onboarding prior to getting employees into their unit

1.2.3. Participation in development opportunities may not be supported, recognized or rewarded in all units

1.2.4. Historical funding constraints have led to the consolidation of positions and greater work demands for many employees across campus

1.2.5. Opposing perceptions of fairness with flexibility and opportunities for remote work; a lack of technical support for non-University owned equipment for remote employees

1.3. What are our strengths and opportunities?

1.3.1. The potential for departments with employees within the same household/on the same insurance plan to split the cost of fringe benefits represents an opportunity

1.3.2. Onboarding models such as Alice T. Clark and the Great Start program (in development) should be supported and expanded

1.3.3. Possibilities for training in small groups and cohorts, rather than in isolation, should be explored

1.3.4. Existing wellness programs represent a strength; the “post-pandemic” era has led to a cultural shift acknowledging the importance of health and well-being

1.3.5. Opportunities to help supervisors facilitate remote work environments should be supported, which may require redefining cultural expectations regarding availability, process and urgency

**Theme 2: We must acknowledge and reward the good work that people do at UND**

2.1. How do we accomplish this?

2.1.1. Connect job duties to our institutional goals, objectives, and values

2.1.2. Adequately define and “count” job tasks and expectations

2.1.3. Strengthen pathways to succession planning and promotion

2.1.4. Implement transparent, equitable, and constructive processes of evaluation

2.1.5. Support opportunities to celebrate our work and accomplishments

2.2. What challenges are present?

2.2.1. Current processes do not use this model, requiring a cultural shift; may be more difficult for some employees to see the connection between their position and institutional goals and values

2.2.2. Existing norms for page 2’s and position descriptions may not accurately reflect actual time and effort needed for tasks; “invisible” work is not recognized

2.2.3. Must assess promotional pathways for contingent faculty and create promotional pathways and succession planning processes for staff

2.2.4. Inability to provide timely feedback and a lack of shared understanding of evaluation rating systems

2.2.5. Existing policies that limit how funds can be used for events that employees enjoy

2.3. What are our strengths and opportunities?

2.3.1. Our new strategic plan provides an opportunity to connect our work with our values and goals purposefully

2.3.2. Opportunities for information sharing about what is working in other units

2.3.3. Opportunity to identify best practices in the “post-Covid” environment

2.3.4. Opportunity to review the SELFI and refine evaluations to reduce subjective scoring

2.3.5. We have a genuinely caring campus that enjoys celebrating accomplishments

**Theme 3: We must facilitate a sense of community and belonging among our employees**

3.1. How will we accomplish this?

3.1.1. Nurture a shared vision of our goals and purpose

3.1.2. Foster a culture where the needs of employees are considered, and their expertise is valued in planning and decision-making

3.1.3. Support a culture of trust with frequent and transparent communication

3.1.4. Create and utilize spaces for gathering and opportunities to make meaningful connections with others across campus

3.1.5. Build a culture of self-expression and inclusion that values diversity of all kinds

3.2. What challenges are present?

3.2.1. Perception of a disconnect between what we say we value and what we do

3.2.2. Must facilitate a greater sense of involvement with administration to build and foster a culture of employee engagement

3.2.3. Difficulties navigating the UND website to find needed information; perceived lack of transparency, especially regarding budgets and appointments

3.2.4. Potential barriers due to funding constraints and a lack of understanding about positions and the needs of units when designing spaces

3.2.5. National, state, and local tensions over concepts related to DEIA

3.3. What are our strengths and opportunities?

3.3.1. Use Town Halls to facilitate transparency and a shared understanding of our vision

3.3.2. Opportunities to support our structures of shared governance; utilizing an engagement measurement program could be helpful

3.3.3. Frequent Town Halls with current leadership and video messaging from the President; possible development of an intra-web for employees; support opportunities to provide upward feedback and reviews of leadership

3.3.4. New facilities provide spaces for gathering; need to continually solicit information about the space needs of units

3.3.5. Provide more opportunities for DEIA training and programming; find ways to engage a wider range of stakeholders in DEIA discussions; support community building and belonging early on starting with recruitment

**Action Plan**

Given the themes and ideas above, we propose the following as some of the top priorities UND should focus on accomplishing through our next strategic plan:

**Priority 1**: Ensure we are providing competitive compensation and benefits to recruit and retain a diverse and robust workforce. Actions might include compensation reviews and evaluation of our standards for adequate compensation, advocacy with the state legislature, and partnering with NDPERS to explore possibilities for more competitive options for benefit packages that allow for greater flexibility. Metrics might include monitoring recruiting and retention rates and percentiles for salary compensation rates.

**Priority 2**: Supporting flexible and adaptive work arrangements where appropriate to enhance employee productivity, well-being, and workplace culture. Actions might include information sharing and other support for supervisors and employees to understand the basis and options for flexible work arrangements and debunking misconceptions of flexible or remote work that cause undue hardship between employees. Appropriate metrics would need to be developed to monitor the implementation of this.

**Priority 3**: Provide a meaningful and informative orientation to campus and the greater Grand Forks community. Actions might include building upon existing strengths such as the Alice T. Clark program and New Faculty Orientation, and supporting the development of the Great Start Program, which includes continual onboarding efforts and associated supervisor training. Metrics might include satisfaction surveys as well as turnover and retention rates.

**Priority 4**: Build a welcoming culture of self-expression and inclusion. Actions might include reevaluating and developing policies to address aspects of DEIA, including clear strategies related to recruiting and retaining a diverse workforce, addressing isms on campus (i.e., racism, heterosexism, able body-ism, sexism, classism, etc.), offering more learning opportunities on DEIA topics, regularly informing the campus about DEIA initiatives, and recognizing the time employees put into these efforts. Metrics might include monitoring the number of trainings offered and utilized and the development of measures to be included in regular campus climate surveys.

**Priority 5**: Strengthen and develop inclusive pathways to succession planning and promotion for staff and faculty, including non-tenure track faculty. Actions might include ensuring education and professional development opportunities to support employee advancement in their careers. Metrics might include job development program utilization rates, turnover, absenteeism and a baseline job satisfaction and climate survey to continue over a period of at least five years.

**Priority 6**: Implement transparent, equitable, and constructive processes of evaluation. Actions might include assessing current evaluation processes on campus, recognizing and rewarding the wide range of activities and work employees do, more efforts to support norming of evaluations, creating more evaluation training that meets employee and supervisor needs, and continued development opportunities to address objectivity, implicit bias, and discrimination. Metrics might include the development of measures to be included in a regular climate survey. Additional metrics would need to be developed to monitor implementation.

**Priority 7**: Support a culture of trust with frequent and transparent communication in order to nurture a shared vision of our goals and purpose. Actions might include continuing with consistent messaging from the President and other University leadership to make the goals, purpose, and rationale for decisions (especially budgetary and appointments) well known by all. Metrics might include tracking the number and frequency of updates, the number of attendees at live updates and views of recorded updates to show consistent contact with campus and communication satisfaction measures to be included in a regular climate survey.

**Priority 8**: Foster a culture where the needs, advice and expertise of employees is valued in planning and decision-making. Actions might include continually gathering information about the space needs of units and departments, keeping considerations of physical space accessibility a priority when designing and implementing projects, supporting transparent and democratic processes for including employee input, bringing visibility to and utilizing employee survey results, recognizing and making use of existing professional expertise in in our workforce. Metrics might include assessing participation in planning activities to maximize inclusivity and relevant expertise, tracking the use of surveys and subsequent communication of results and action plans to the campus community.

**Other Items for Consideration**

We heard many thoughtful suggestions during the course of this process; it is impossible to include them all in this report. For example, there is great interest in expanding efforts to support work-life balance and the childcare needs of families, as well as job development opportunities such as expanded options for earning credentials while employed at UND. Efforts to connect duties to institutional goals would help provide meaning to the work we do and assist in identifying tasks that are unnecessary. Adequately defining job tasks and expectations is critical to employee success and requires making tasks that are often invisible visible. It is critical we support and expand opportunities to celebrate our work and accomplishments as these efforts help keep morale high and facilitate solidarity. As we create new spaces for gathering and provide opportunities to make meaningful connections with across campus, we ought to evaluate interest and possibilities for bringing back dedicated spaces such as the Twamley snack bar, and the women’s and international centers. Finally, many people want to know how they can assist with efforts to educate policymakers and advocate for employees.

**Concluding Recommendations**

Given the findings of our discussions with UND employees and stakeholders, we strongly recommend that the SPC include a pillar for valuing and supporting employees in UND’s new strategic plan that addresses the elements outlined in themes one and two above. There is a great deal of overlap with other workgroups in the third theme we identified (facilitating a sense of community and belonging), so elements of this theme could be reflected in other pillars. Regardless of whether valuing and supporting employees is chosen as a formal, standalone pillar in the new strategic plan, we believe serious and careful consideration of the themes identified above would serve the university well in achieving its goals and making UND a premier workplace in the region.