Cohesive and Supportive Culture in order to attract, develop and advance the best staff in the field

Setting the stage

The Division of Student Affairs at University of California, Berkeley has been engaged in a long-term strategic planning process since 2012. This effort to “Dream Big” is aimed at transforming the division’s services and solutions to world class levels – making the total student environment one with strong support, inclusiveness and belonging. To make this happen, the environment and culture of work will need to attract the best possible talent and provide employees at all levels with a shared sense of engagement and opportunities to develop and advance their capabilities.

The division has moved through several stages to set direction, reach out to stakeholders, analyze findings, and narrow the focus. This included outreach to peer institutions, focus groups with students across the campus, and staff interviews, all aimed at finding those common elements that could establish direction and drive strategic action. The results of this two year arc of activities made a compelling case for the focus on a “culture of care” within the division. Ultimately, students’ interaction with staff is fundamental to the kind of out-of-classroom experience that promotes engagement, success, and attachment to UC Berkeley; that’s why the staff environment and work culture matter so critically.

Challenges and opportunities

To shift the culture of any organization will require a true level of commitment, focus, and intentionality. This is especially true for service organizations where people are, in essence, the brand and ambassadors of the desired culture. Staff engagement at a deeper level will be necessary than has been the case historically. Employee attitudes toward work and the work environment, attachment to a clear vision and mission, behaviors and actions toward students and other staff – all coalesce to create the sense of cohesion and support that everyone wants. To get there, Student Affairs has first to define what the attributes of the desired culture are; these constitute the characteristics, behaviors and actions that managers and staff are expected to embody – and against which they can be assessed. Given the wide range of staff responsibilities ranging from “back of the room” services such as facilities maintenance and technology experts to front line experts like admissions counselors and student organization advisors, it will first require a cohesive and permeable definition of culture everyone can understand and support. The breaking down of silos and a concerted effort to integrate all parts of the work as contributing to the student experience will be a critical part of the effort.

Future State
An ideal future state will foster a high performing and cohesive culture based on shared purpose and values. Staff will feel a deeper and more engaging sense of connection to the people, leaders, and ultimately the core purpose and values of their work in Student Affairs and UC Berkeley overall. We expect staff to understand why they have chosen to work and contribute to the public good at UC Berkeley. This will be accomplished throughout the employee lifecycle beginning with recruitment practices based on cultural fit over traditional talent models. Robust onboarding and continued intentional engagement will focus on caring for staff – who, in return, will care for students. The Division will focus on providing ongoing training and professional development opportunities, and as a result, the staff will have a clear and constant connection to the mission and vision of the organization. Our goal is for all employees to have a sense of ownership in the work they do; a continuously improving program of focused development and coaching supports this aim by providing the opportunity for people to stretch and challenge their learning edge for high performance. Ultimately, this strong staff engagement effort will lead UC Berkeley to become an employer of choice in the Student Affairs field. This cultural evolution within the Division is a critical underpinning to deliver an incomparable out-of-classroom experience for our students.