Response to October 2017 Postdoc Value Survey

Date: September 25, 2018

The Mellon College of Science (MCS) undertook a series of significant survey and strategic planning initiatives in Spring of 2017. As part of this move to improve the college, a series of surveys have been professionally designed to gain information about Work, Culture, and Image to name only a few of the areas surveyed. The purpose of the surveys is to identify actionable issues that the college itself can address. Some of the issues (e.g., building, salaries, benefits, etc.) are larger issues that can be influenced at a higher level, but ultimately these issues are not within the total responsibility of MCS.

Reported here are the significant drivers (i.e., what we learned) from the October 2017 survey of the Mellon College of Science Postdoctoral Associates, and the actionable items addressed. These are all ongoing issues that will continue to be improved over time. One issue that has been identified as part of the Value Survey process is that the title “Special Faculty” has been allowed to be used interchangeably with “Postdoctoral Fellow”; this is a problem in identifying the actual postdoctoral population in MCS. Progress has been made, and we are working with Human Resources at CMU. MCS is reviewing titles, job descriptions and work responsibilities and expectations to resolve this issue.

Work Environment

While Doherty Hall, Wean Hall and Mellon Institute together make up the majority of the work environment for MCS, the majority of the issues/comments are related to Mellon Institute (gas leaks, fire alarms, flooding, food services, security). Further, the majority of the postdoctoral associates are located in the departments of Biology and Chemistry (located in Mellon Institute). In response:

a. Direct communication with Central, about the poor work conditions in Mellon Institute, has been established (e.g., photos of flooding sent to Provost and President and VP for Facilities and VP of Operations (VPO); direct calls to Provost and VPO during gas order evacuations of Mellon Institute, etc.). In recent years many of the issues in Mellon Institute have been addressed (if at all) internally; thus Central has been largely unaware of issues (until now).

b. Security of Mellon Institute is being reviewed and updated. The establishment of the CMU-PITT MRI Center in the basement of Mellon (this is not yet in place, and will be socialized as progress is being made) will largely address the ongoing lack of, and need for, better security.

c. The ongoing gas order issue in Mellon Institute has been resolved.

d. Food services:
   a. Stephanie’s (Mellon Institute) has been updated, automated and relocated to the 4th floor of Mellon (grand opening with free food September 2018)
      i. Flat top tables and stools are on order
ii. Junk food is as expensive as always, and healthy food (salads, etc.) is cost effective for postdocs.

e. Wean Hall coffee shop updated with more lighting and options.

f. A series of afterhours professional development workshops are being created to serve the needs of all MCS postdocs and graduate students. These will be cost free, and available at off hours (lunchtime) and after 5pm.

g. There is a desire to have a postdoc network and/or postdoc association. Typically, this sort of organization is initiated by the population affected, but certainly the leadership of MCS can help facilitate these interactions.

h. There is a general sense that the postdoc population is invisible and undervalued. With the action items mentioned here, we are actively working to improve the postdoc work environment experience.

i. Childcare availability and cost, three year vesting on retirement, and healthcare are all issues that are being evaluated to learn what MCS can change internally and what are restricted by the university.

**Work and Remuneration.**

Overall there is a sense from the postdocs that there is value in the research they are doing, and that they see it as a career path forward. Given the cost of living in Pittsburgh, in general the postdoctoral community in MCS acknowledge their pay is reasonable, but national standards for the salaries of postdoc are too low. Federally funded postdoc salaries are set by agencies.

**Communication and Image**

There is a desire to be better informed (i.e., transparency) at the college level, and to improve the image of the college both internal to CMU and externally. To address these issues the following work is being done:

a. Town halls. One will be established for postdocs… have already been done for graduate students and faculty and centers.

b. Website restructuring at all levels for the purpose of improved communication and professional image

c. Improved communication outwardly to other colleges on campus and the larger community
   a. Website
   b. Social media
   c. News releases
   d. Videos
   e. Public events

d. A MCS “Intranet” is established, initially for the research component of MCS, and will be expanded to include information about job training and other opportunities.
   a. The MCS Strategic Plan (and departments) will be posted here.

e. Both MCS Minute and Dean’s Dispatch have been established to provide weekly and bi-weekly communication to staff, students and faculty
f. Continued survey of faculty, staff, postdocs, and students in MCS for the purpose of communicating needs, and providing students, staff and faculty with an avenue to see and hear that their issues are being read and addressed.