Improving Community & Culture in Food Science & Technology Department at Virginia Tech

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Background – problem defined:
Historically, the Food Science & Technology Department at Virginia Tech has had a positive, collaborative and welcoming culture. However, in 2014, the department split apart physically when 90% of the faculty/staff moved into a new building. The new building was a dedicated research building, and all research faculty and staff transitioned to the space. The remaining, teaching/extension focused faculty remained in the old run-down building (FST Building). Over time there became a significant hierarchy between research and teaching/extension.   Additionally, there was a university-wide structure change in the Administrative and Professional Faculty category which exacerbated the hierarchy (tenure vs non-tenure track) in the department. Following this, the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic destroyed relationships and community. I took over leadership of the department in fall 2020 and the conflict and frustrations between faculty was clear. I focused efforts to understand the problem and find solutions to building community again. A key indicator that I focused on was participation and satisfaction with the annual department-wide end-of-year research poster competition. Following COVID the participation in this event was very low. It was a requirement for graduate students, but many faculty (especially teaching/extension) felt that it "wasted their time" or "was irrelevant to their work". I was disappointed that there was a lack of effort to support our students (both graduate and undergraduate). I wanted support for this event to increase.

Goal:
To collect data related to culture and community and develop a clear action plan to make improvements

Objectives:
1) Conduct a departmental climate survey in collaboration with the Diversity, Equity and Inclusion committee
2) Collaborate with the University Ombuds office to conduct one-on-one interviews with faculty and staff to collect data related to culture and community
3) Conduct a Department Retreat focused on Team building
4) Implement an action plan during 2024/2025 academic year to make improvements

Accomplishments:

- Department wide climate survey completed in fall 2022. Key findings included that most of the respondents were generally satisfied with the sense of community that they experience in the FST department, however, 10% reported being "generally dissatisfied". One of the outcomes of the survey was the implementation of Professional Development and learning opportunities for the department around relationships, team building and conflict management.
- The DEI committee began to host quarterly "Community building hours" to help focus on relationship development and networking
- Work with the University Ombuds occurred during the Fall 2023 Academic Year, resulting in a day-long team building retreat in December 2024. The retreat focused on group work and discussion around "What is working well?", "What are some of our challenges?" and "What are some ideas for addressing our challenges"
- Key results in each of the three categories were:
  - *What is working well?* - Leadership, Collegiality (with some reservations), good work productivity, programmatic independence, good work/life balance, Excellent facilities (new building)
  - *What are some challenges?* – Hierarchy/inequity, not knowing what each other is doing, physical separation, felling undervalued, communication, roles/responsibilities are unclear
  - *Idea's for addressing challenges?* – Coffee hour/ social hour, clearly stated expectations, org. chart/more transparency, happy hour/ wine tasting, there needs to be a culture of supporting the entire department – not just one person's specific program
- Three main buckets for improvement – 1) Growth in resources, 2) Communication, 3) Community building
- Action items for 2024/2025 Academic Year –
  - Re-introduce where roles/responsibilities, org chart etc. was all available
  - Held community hours, Coffee hours
  - Alumni events
  - Kick off lunches for each semester

Success Indicator:
The improved communication and team building time together resulted in a committee being formed to revise and restructure the annual research poster competition. This work (which took plan AY24/25) resulted in more buy-in for the event and record attendance spring 2025. A key improvement was the integration of research talks as well as posters, highlighting undergraduate research and classroom product development projects which made the event more inclusive of all faculty/staff/students.