



UNIVERSITY
OF ALBERTA

2024

Shaping the People Strategy: What We Heard

A Report on the Consultation Process

February 2024



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The University of Alberta, its buildings, labs and research stations are primarily located on the territory of the Néhiyaw (Cree), Niitsitapi (Blackfoot), Métis, Nakoda (Stoney), Dene, Haudenosaunee (Iroquois) and Anishinaabe (Ojibway/ Saulteaux), lands that are now known as part of Treaties 6, 7 and 8 and homeland of the Métis. The University of Alberta respects the sovereignty, lands, histories, languages, knowledge systems and cultures of all First Nations, Métis and Inuit nations.



Introduction

This document presents the key findings from our consultations to date, synthesized into a set of key themes representing the major ideas we heard across the university.

This document is not a draft of the People Strategy, but it will guide the next stage of the Steering Committee's work.

MESSAGE FROM THE STEERING COMMITTEE CO-CHAIRS:

On behalf of the People Strategy Steering Committee, we would like to share our sincere gratitude to everyone who participated in this process. We thank you for taking the time to share your input, and especially for your honesty and vulnerability in these conversations. The U of A's People Strategy will be about shaping a work environment where all of us – wherever we sit in the university – not only can do our best work, but can feel supported within a thriving community. We are committed to honouring your input and, together with the Steering Committee, developing a strategy that responds meaningfully to the priorities you have shared.

Dr. Verna Yiu

Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

Todd Gilchrist

Vice-President (University Services and Finance)



WHAT IS A PEOPLE STRATEGY?

[SHAPE: A Strategic Plan of Impact](#) identifies people as the cornerstone of the university's ambitions. Now, the University of Alberta is undertaking the development of a People Strategy. The People Strategy will aim to fulfil this vision by supporting a culture and environment where University of Alberta faculty, staff and all employees can flourish.

To achieve the broad vision of SHAPE, the university has multiple institutional plans — including [Forward with Purpose: A Strategic Plan for Research and Innovation](#); [Braiding Past, Present and Future: Indigenous Strategic Plan](#); EDI Action Plan (in development); [Culture of Care](#); and the [Student Experience Action Plan](#). The People Strategy will be at the heart of how we deliver on all these plans. Without an effective work environment and thriving culture, we cannot deliver on any of our goals.

In November 2023, the university released the results of its first institution-wide [Faculty and Staff Engagement Survey](#). The purpose of the survey is to measure and understand perceptions of the U of A as a place to work — what we are doing well and where there are opportunities for growth and improvement. The People Strategy will build on these insights, providing a roadmap to creating a culture and environment that supports people to do their best work, and to thrive, personally and in their careers.

DEVELOPING THE PEOPLE STRATEGY

The development of the People Strategy is guided by a [Steering Committee](#) drawn from across the university and co-chaired by the Provost & Vice-President (Academic) and the Vice-President (University Services & Finance).

Broad consultation took place in November and December 2023, with additional consultation concluding in January 2024. We collected extensive qualitative input through an online form and a series of roundtable discussions, including sessions within each college, stand-alone faculty and administrative service portfolio. We held dedicated sessions for specific employee groups, and active consultation with standing bodies such as the Indigenous Advisory Council. We also sought input at the autumn 2023 Senior Leadership Retreat, and from our governing bodies at the annual Board-GFC-Senate Summit. Input from the discussion sessions was captured without identifying information, and all input has been coded and analyzed to inform the What We Heard report.



Acknowledgment of the current environment

Many of the consultations involved difficult conversations. We recognize that there is consultation fatigue, as well as frustration about the perceived lack of action on some concerns — so the Steering Committee is sincerely grateful to all who took the time to participate. We heard many positive opportunities for progress, and were touched by the depth of commitment to the university's mission and shared values.

We heard that it is essential to begin from a place of humility and acknowledgment of the challenges that many in our university community experience, and that frustration was a common thread that ran across all other themes. We heard resoundingly that people are still struggling with the impacts of the enormous changes experienced over the last several years due to our unprecedented budget reductions, the resulting reorganization of the university and the effects of the pandemic.

We heard varied input on these impacts, but participants in particular highlighted:

- grief over the loss of valued colleagues and valued ways of working;
- a sense of being asked to do more with less (and that less is often not enough);
- perception that our core work is being undermined by the downloading of self-service administrative work; and
- a feeling that things simply are not yet working as committed — that people do not have the right environments, resources, supports, or sometimes even roles to contribute to their fullest and make a positive impact.

Many shared that they felt frustration or even despair not only because these issues are serious, but because they do not perceive that the university is moving fast enough or effectively enough to address them.



REBUILDING TRUST IS A PRECONDITION FOR PROGRESS

Across all themes, we heard about the importance of rebuilding trust across the U of A community, and particularly trust in the university's executive leadership.

Our 2023 Employee Engagement Survey told us there is work to do in the areas of having trust and confidence in the university's executive leadership (30 per cent favourable) and the university doing a job of listening to the concerns of faculty and staff (24 per cent favourable).

And in our conversations informing the People Strategy, we heard some of the key ingredients in rebuilding trust: listen to people, act on their concerns and ensure transparent and meaningful involvement in decision-making. Accountability is central and we heard a desire for leadership to strengthen its accountability to the university community in regards to living up to leadership's stated values and commitments—and a desire for the university to articulate its core values more directly. These ideas are threaded throughout the themes that follow.

POSITIVE ELEMENTS TO BUILD ON

As real as these challenges are, we also heard about substantial positive elements that the People Strategy can build on, and these are also seen across the themes that follow.

Across all employee groups, we consistently heard a broad and deep commitment to the U of A's mission and core values, and a strong commitment to providing outstanding teaching and learning, supporting staff and students, and supporting a dynamic and comprehensive research and innovation enterprise. The U of A's people take pride in their work, and in the accomplishments and expertise of their colleagues.

Another consistent thread was the high level of support and engagement that people feel at the local level – within their own departments, faculties, units or teams. This feeling was not universal but it was prominent, and we heard in multiple sessions that we should look to local-level successes, and particularly to focusing on building and sustaining teamwork and collaboration to inform our university-wide strategy.

This resonates strongly with the findings of the 2023 Employee Engagement Survey, where respondents were positive about co-operation and teamwork within their local team (80 per cent favourable).

When asked about positive work to build on, participants shared that some of the university's major community-oriented initiatives – such as our equity, diversity and inclusion (EDI) initiatives and the Student Experience Action Plan – were moving our culture in the right direction. We also heard a sense of cautious optimism about administrative improvements that are underway, and about recent efforts to restore trust in leadership, such as the transparency in sharing the full 2023 employee engagement results.



Emerging themes

As participants reflected on what it would mean to thrive at the University of Alberta and on how to achieve the culture we want, the key ideas coalesced around five themes, described below.

THEME 1:

The need for **high-functioning supports and resources** to enable people to thrive in their roles

"[To thrive would mean] Work is impactful, acknowledged and results in meaningful change – adequate organizational and administrative supports are in place to facilitate operationalization of strategic plans and vision – there is a sense of community; easy to find and interact with others who are engaged in similar work."

- online respondent

"Support" was the key word we heard most often. People feel that to succeed in their roles, they need more effective administrative services, more efficient and sophisticated systems and processes, and better collaboration. We heard that these are issues that hit home for employees on a daily basis, whether they are in academic or administrative roles. And we heard that without these supports, people feel undervalued and unable to contribute to the mission and strategic goals of the university, and less able to see a positive career path for themselves at the U of A.

This theme resonates strongly with the results of the Faculty and Staff Engagement Survey. When we asked people to respond to the statement, "There is effective sharing of ideas and resources across the university," 71 per cent responded either in the neutral or unfavourable categories.

In the People Strategy consultations, faculty in particular expressed challenges around the shift to a self-service model for initiating some service requests. Participants generally felt that support services on the whole were not performing well, resulting in delays, difficulty functioning and a lack of clarity about how to get things done. (Examples included delays in getting graduate students hired and paid, and difficulties receiving reimbursements.) In some cases we heard concerns about the ability to get access to appropriate equipment (examples include computers and



software) to fulfil job functions. From all groups, we heard that the implementation of centralized service centres has contributed to depersonalization — when colleagues are not connecting as distinct individuals, it is harder to understand each other's needs and work together effectively. There was a view in these responses that our support services lack accountability to the people they serve.

We heard a great deal about what it would take to get to a place of thriving, and about the opportunities for progress. Collaboration and communication were reported as key enablers, over and above the organizational model. This included several elements. The most frequently cited was moving to a shared investment in common goals — where everyone is invested in helping each other navigate the system — as opposed to an attitude of “not my job.” Participants cited many positive examples of this kind of shared investment, and many long-term employees reported a sense of pride and accomplishment in helping their colleagues find solutions.

We heard about simple steps that can be taken to mitigate the sense of depersonalization in university-wide services. Participants cited examples such as being able to interact with service centre staff by name, even when using a generic inbox, and being able to connect by phone to talk through unique challenges.

We also heard some cautious optimism about work that is already underway on administrative improvement through the Continuous Administrative Service Improvement Project (CASIP) and through the ongoing establishment of the college offices. Some positive examples of improvement were cited, including improved HR processing times this year compared to last, and the professionalism of staff within the colleges. There is a need to show success early and often, particularly in ways that directly affect the day-to-day work of large numbers of faculty, staff and all employees. One key opportunity highlighted was to simplify the process of engaging with the service centres, particularly by simplifying (or reducing) forms and thereby reducing the chance for errors that result in delays.

While the support theme was prominent for all employee groups, we did hear some notable differences between faculty and staff in how it is experienced. Faculty members tended to place greater emphasis on their sense of loss (e.g., the loss of dedicated support at the department level), and on their challenges with the self-serve model for initiating support requests. Staff tended to place more emphasis on the idea that the resources available to support core functions are simply not sufficient. Staff also tended to highlight challenges in processes in particular, and to highlight opportunities to focus on process improvement as well as adopt more up-to-date technology systems in areas where our current systems are cumbersome and difficult to work with.



THEME 2:

The impact of **workload and work-related stress** on our well-being

“Less peripheral work downloaded onto me, so that I can focus on research and teaching. The various pieces required to do our jobs are ever increasing in magnitude, and teaching is a ‘fixed’ requirement of the position that must be delivered on. This means that the window available to do research is ever-shrinking.”

- online respondent

This theme is about addressing the impact of workload and work-related stress on well-being; supporting life-work balance and mitigating burnout; and enhancing the effectiveness of systems and processes to enable employees to focus on the highest-impact and most meaningful work.

The feeling of stress being excessive in roles was identified in the 2023 Engagement Survey results—only 44 per cent of respondents agreed their level of stress in their role is not excessive.

In the People Strategy consultations, workload issues were closely linked to support and resources (Theme 1, above), and with participants’ sense of the ongoing effects of budget reductions and the Service Excellence Transformation (SET). Participants shared an acute sense that the total workload has not lessened, but that we have fewer resources available to meet the needs. We also heard that this is compounded by the sense that support services are not functioning effectively, and that many of our processes and systems are outdated. Staff told us that they feel they end up backfilling for other functions, on top of their own roles.

Among faculty, we heard that there is a workload impact associated with the self-service model and the perceived downloading of work onto faculties and faculty members. Some articulated that while the administrative tasks they have to complete are not complex, when a faculty member has to do them only occasionally, they tend to be very resource-intensive to navigate.

These issues hold staff and faculty members back from flourishing, in part because they generate high levels of stress, and they make it challenging to maintain a positive life-work balance. We heard about the effects on family life, on opportunities for developmental activities outside of work, and on employees’ own sense of well-being.



From both faculty and staff, we heard that many find it difficult to set boundaries around workload and that the expectation of “do more with less” has become the new norm, not the exception. This is in large part because of their commitment to their colleagues and students and a desire not to let them down by saying no to additional tasks, but we also heard from some that there is a lingering fear of speaking up following the scale of job loss experienced over the last several years. This input resonates with the university’s Culture of Care plan, which identifies the importance of psychological safety in the workplace.

On this theme, we heard less optimism about the path to improvement, but we did hear ideas and opportunities. The need for increased resources was highlighted most frequently, with the view that if and when the university gets increased funding, it needs to be invested in rebuilding and balancing administrative capacity. In terms of support for well-being, some highlighted positive changes in the university’s benefit plans allowing greater flexibility in mental health support.

We also heard about the importance of effective collaboration — that when we work well together, we are more efficient and we free up more time to focus on the work that matters. The most positive elements to build on were related to local cultures within teams, units and departments. Workload issues were challenging, but we heard examples of teams supporting each other, reallocating work and fixing their own internal processes to make work more efficient.

There were also opportunities highlighted for the university as a whole to set different cultural expectations around workload throughout the organization—conversations centred around this needing to begin with our executive leadership. Participants highlighted the need to reduce instances where employees feel asked to do more with less as a baseline expectation, and to support people in setting reasonable boundaries around the work expected of them. Participants were not clearly aligned on how to achieve those shifts.

There were some notable differences in responses between groups. For faculty members, the preponderant emphasis was around wanting to be able to dedicate more time to the core mission of teaching and, more notably, research. Support staff were more likely to cite fear or worry around their ability to set boundaries in their work. Graduate student employees expressed the strongest sense of vulnerability around being able to set boundaries or otherwise advocate for themselves, and highlighted their high degree of dependence on individual supervisors as a distinct challenge. Graduate students also highlighted the opportunity to mitigate issues through better training and support for supervisors, and greater emphasis on consistency in certain core practices.



THEME 3:

The desire for a sense of **community and connection** within a **culture of trust and respect**

"I think in general a culture that is focused on long-term relationship building and how transformative this could be in so many ways, versus short-term, transactional goals would be a wonderful shift."

- online respondent

Theme 3 is focused on creating and sustaining a greater sense of community at the U of A through an emphasis on relationships and connection, and stronger collaboration and communication — underpinned by a culture of trust and respect.

The importance of rebuilding relationships across the university was the central idea expressed across this theme. People recognize that the combination of job losses, reorganization and the pandemic has disrupted the network of relationships that once existed, and that this has resulted in a loss of the sense of connectedness — as well as harming our effectiveness at work. When we relate as individuals, we are more likely to help and support each other. We heard that there is a need to create purposeful opportunities to rebuild relationships, both in the ways we work every day and through events and get-togethers that help create fun and enjoyment. It was noted through this theme that there is a significant feeling of disconnection from those who are not located on North Campus. This was heard from groups located in some of the stand-alone faculties and those located at Enterprise Square.

We heard that respect is absolutely fundamental to building community. This includes respect for each other's expertise and roles (with improved role clarity), resulting in placing greater trust in people to exercise judgment and creativity within their roles. Respect also includes establishing stronger norms around treating each other with kindness. This was highlighted much more strongly by support staff and Academic Teaching Staff (ATS) members than by other groups. ATS members in particular also highlighted that respect is about inclusion — specifically, inclusion of all employee groups in decision-making and in academic culture.

Collegial governance was an important sub-theme raised by academic staff, including the need for a strong commitment to collegial governance as a foundation for community and a need for stronger processes and practices to ensure collegiality is reflected broadly in decision-making.

Workload is an important intersecting dimension. We heard that rebuilding relationships takes an investment of time, and that this is hard to achieve when people feel they are already overwhelmed. Some suggested that even attending fun community events just



feels like an extra task, or will require them to make up for the time spent at these events when their workload is already high.

On this theme more than any other, we heard numerous positive examples to build on. People generally (though not unanimously) reported feeling positive about their local teams and departments, feeling they had a sense of community and a sense of belonging to a group that was invested in their success. Some academic colleagues highlighted the culture of mentorship in their departments, while academic staff also identified opportunities to formalize mentorship programming. Staff were more likely to highlight their longevity in a unit (including a sense of loyalty and belonging) and the continuity of relationships as an important factor. We heard about some of the strategies that teams and departments use to bring people together.

It is important to note some exceptions. Some newer employees, who joined after the beginning of the pandemic, reported a sense of isolation in their local environment.

This may be linked to what we heard about remote and hybrid work. In general, people highly value remote and hybrid work for its flexibility and accessibility, and for the ways it helps with life-work balance. It was clear through discussions this was a benefit people did not want to see go away. However we have not yet struck the right balance in some areas, as we also heard that people are missing the incidental connections that happened when we were together more often. In a hybrid world, we need to be purposeful about finding ways to connect. One suggestion was to have core “in-office days” versus a more sporadic approach.

At a university-wide level, we heard frequently that institutional initiatives grounded in shared values are making a positive contribution to creating a sense of community. As key examples, participants highlighted the university’s work in EDI and, most frequently, cited the Student Experience Action Plan.



THEME 4:

The importance of long-term **career development** in allowing people to flourish

"[I want to be] valued for the work I do, not only by my supervisor, but also by the greater department and faculty. We will know when we get there by seeing greater retention and recognition of trust in staff, and equitable and inclusive training, professional development, and recognition events for operating and trust staff."

- online respondent

We heard across the board about people's desire to create paths for flourishing long-term careers at the University of Alberta, with the ability to advance their skills and knowledge and to see corresponding positional advancement. Equally important to some was the ability to continue to grow within their existing positions, without necessarily considering promotional opportunities.

One of the most common ideas expressed was the desire to take part in formal professional development programming. This was coupled with the sense that current workload demands make it challenging to invest the time required. We also heard about the desire for people to grow their skills through their everyday jobs, both through greater flexibility within roles and through greater mobility across roles in the university. Ideas here included more strategic use of secondments or project-based roles to support skill development and growth. For staff, this was felt to be particularly important in a context where the functional specialization of roles can make it hard to envision non-linear career paths. The desire for a formal mentorship program was heard through many of the discussions, however was more prominent among the staff group.

The 2023 Employee Engagement Survey notes only 49 per cent of respondents agree that the university provides training so that they can perform their role well and only 42 per cent responded favourably that their role leaves adequate time to take advantage of role-related training opportunities. Just over half (57 per cent) of respondents felt they have opportunities to achieve their career goals at the university.

In the People Strategy consultations, communication was highlighted as a key enabler for this theme. Participants also highlighted the importance of the university communicating clearly with both faculty and staff about how performance, impact and career progression are linked. We heard in several different groups the perception that good performance is not always rewarded through career development, and that promotion decisions do not always seem linked to the university's mission and stated goals.



This theme intersects with discussions about recognition and the importance of feeling valued as a long-term member of the university community (Theme 5, below). We heard from many people who continue to want to make their long-term careers at the U of A and who want to feel that the university is equally invested in them.

As positive building blocks for the future, participants highlighted recent improvements in the university's professional development and leadership development programming. Formal programming was felt to be broadly available, although work-related demands made it challenging to access. Participants also cited positive examples of local-level mentorship, both formal and informal.

In this theme, there were some notable differences in emphasis across different groups. Among Academic Teaching Staff (ATS) members in particular, we heard about the critical importance of addressing inequities between instructional staff and tenure-track faculty. ATS members reported that they need to see a career path that is less precarious than currently, that is more clearly valued by the university and that includes support for them to participate in the academic community. Among graduate student employees, we heard about the value of the university's programming around professional development, but we also heard the desire for the university to ensure consistency in how this is implemented. Among faculty members, we heard particularly about the importance of our incentives (such as faculty evaluation and awards) matching our values, so that they can see a stronger path for progressive advancement in areas focused on community-based research.



THEME 5:

The need to **value the contributions** of people in all roles, as the cornerstone of a flourishing workplace

“Diversifying opportunities to serve, reaching out to everyone, actively listening, engagingly explaining, transparently informing, training to develop, encouraging to support, recognizing to motivate; which comes down to knowing how to say Thank You.”

- online respondent

We heard that feeling valued within the university is a key dimension of flourishing — that we all want to feel valued in our roles and for our work, and it is difficult to feel like part of the community otherwise. This theme encompasses both formal recognition programs and informal recognition, which ranges from saying “thank you,” to providing opportunities for meaningful and challenging work, to celebrating all the people who enable the university to function.

One of the top drivers for engagement is feeling valued as a member of the university. Participants suggested that the university can ensure people feel valued in many ways, such as showing care and concern for faculty and staff; listening to concerns of faculty and staff; and having open and honest communication. In the 2023 Employee Engagement Survey, 55 per cent responded that they feel valued as a faculty or staff member. However in other areas such as listening to the cares and concerns of faculty and staff, only 24 per cent responded favourably, with a high neutral of 29 per cent.

In the People Strategy discussions, we heard about several related topics, most commonly communication. Participants expressed the importance of sending clear messages about the work we value and providing visibility to the work that keeps the university running. We heard that we all take pride in the outstanding achievements of our researchers, but we also need to celebrate everything behind the scenes that allows their work to happen.

The desire for stronger formal mechanisms for recognition was also a common theme. It was also noted in several discussions about the inequity of recognition depending on where people are located within the university. Participants expressed wanting recognition to be tangible and meaningful, e.g., in the form of pay, time off or other meaningful rewards. But they also expressed the need for flexibility, acknowledging that different people want to be recognized in different ways.

Informal forms of recognition were also seen as fundamentally important. We heard that these take multiple forms and are linked to creating a broader culture of respect (Theme 3, above). Stronger norms around respectful interactions help to reinforce a sense of



being valued in our work. And belonging is also about feeling valued for our perspectives and knowledge. We heard that inclusion in meaningful work and decision-making is itself a form of recognition — and by the same token, when consultation is perceived to be in bad faith or people feel their input has not had an impact on decision-making, it erodes the sense of feeling valued.

Among the positive opportunities for progress, participants highlighted recent progress in university communications including more equitable visibility of different groups and different kinds of contributions. The Student Experience Action Plan was particularly highlighted as a positive step toward recognizing some forms of student-facing work that many felt have been undervalued in the past.

All employee groups expressed the importance of recognition and feeling valued, but it is important to highlight that we heard that perceived inequities between different groups can seriously undermine a culture of belonging. We heard this from support staff and ATS members particularly — when they feel they are not equitably included in decision-making or that their professionalism and expertise are not respected, other efforts at recognition or appreciation are not meaningful.

OTHER NOTABLE AREAS OF INPUT

There are four specific areas of input that we heard less frequently but that were of significant importance to those who mentioned them.

- **Indigenous initiatives:** Several respondents pointed to these as areas of pride to build on, and highlighted the importance of continuing to embed these commitments into the university's everyday work. Others noted the importance of ongoing operational funding for Indigenous initiatives and greater central support for Indigenous engagement and celebration.
- **Infrastructure and facilities:** a small number of participants reported facing major accessibility challenges in their immediate work environment, including issues that impair their access to research facilities and/or washrooms. Several other participants reported that issues with general levels of cleanliness and maintenance on our campuses are having a negative impact on morale.
- **Onboarding:** in general, new employees reported missed opportunities in the onboarding phase. Some identified feelings of isolation, while others mentioned that they did not feel they had been fully introduced to the university's values and organizational context, or oriented to processes and benefits.
- **Student-supervisor dynamics:** graduate student employees in particular noted the difficulty of separating their roles as students and as employees, and expressed the importance of strengthening mechanisms for addressing supervisor concerns safely and confidentially.



Conclusion

The input received through the consultation process provides a robust foundation to directly inform the development of the People Strategy. The insights resonate with and deepen the insights from the Employee Engagement Survey, and have identified a clear set of both challenges and opportunities as we look to make the University of Alberta a place where people can thrive, both personally and in their careers.

The Steering Committee looks forward to hearing from our community in response to this report, to validate that we have reflected the input fairly and captured the most important themes. Based on this input, the Steering Committee will develop an initial draft of the People Strategy, which will be released for feedback in the coming months.



Appendix: Methodology Notes

The university community consultation involved 27 roundtable discussions and an online input form, as well as various dedicated input sessions with standing groups. Approximately 750 individuals registered for the roundtables, which included a combination of in-person and virtual sessions. To foster active engagement and interaction, the number of participants was intentionally limited to about 25-30 people at each roundtable. Approximately 500 individuals ultimately participated. Consultations also included discussions at the autumn 2023 Senior Leadership Retreat and at board committees, the Board-GFC-Senate Joint Summit, the Indigenous Advisory Council, the GSA Council, and direct outreach to the Association of Academic Staff of the University of Alberta (AASUA) and Non-Academic Staff Association (NASA). Additionally, the online input form garnered 175 responses.

The qualitative analysis employed a comprehensive coding approach, systematically quantifying the frequency of top keywords identified from the data gathered during the consultations. Although certain themes appeared during real-time data collection, the analysis played a crucial role in fine-tuning and prioritizing these themes. This process aimed to reduce potential observer bias introduced during the natural flow of conversations, ensuring a nuanced understanding of the key insights and priorities identified. We used this process to identify the key themes around which this report is structured to provide a basis for the development of the People Strategy.

