

Campus Morale

Concept Paper

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Introduction and background information

The morale of students, faculty, and staff is an important aspect in the determination of the long term successful growth or contraction of a university. East Central University (ECU) has identified factors which contribute in part to campus morale through town hall style forums with university students, personnel and members of the Ada, Oklahoma community. Addressing both student and faculty concerns and adjusting to the changing needs in the local community to grow the campus-community relationship is important as ECU prepares for the future. ECU has placed emphasis on the theme of shared governance among its constituents as the university prepares to meet the challenges ahead.

Some important factors listed by university students that contribute to whether a student generally enjoys their leisure time at the university are campus social events and university organized entertainment. This includes cultural events, performances in the arts, or events organized outside on the lawn. Whether entertainment options are appealing to students, available nightlife and weekend activities were also listed as contributing to whether students stay in Ada, return home area or visit another city with friends and family. Ironically, it is often found that many university events and functions are not well attended by students at ECU. Increased communication and promotion of these events should make students aware of the variety of performances and events that happen on the ECU campus.

The quality of campus facilities are another important aspect of not only student but also employee satisfaction. In terms of dining facilities, some complaints from students have been noted regarding the cafeteria and the options available at the cafeteria. This is not a particularly surprising finding since complaints of cafeteria food are quite common across the board at universities and separating teenagers and young adults from their love of fast food is a common nutritional challenge. ECU also has a separate university center with a grill, pool tables and a workout facility. In regards to other campus facilities, students at ECU generally agree the university has a beautiful campus, however, campus lighting was noted as not being sufficient in certain areas around campus, which is a potential safety issue.

The satisfaction of students is an important aspect of the overall health of the ECU campus, as is the satisfaction of the staff and faculty working at the university. Town hall findings indicate that increasing employee comradery, opportunities for employee collaboration, and especially bringing up salaries to competitive levels were listed as important components that would help towards retaining more employees at ECU.

The importance of the relationship between ECU and the Ada community was also noted as an important contributor to morale. This is important because students who graduate from ECU that

have developed a sense of belonging to or affection for the Ada community are more likely to stay rather than those who mostly stay within the confines (dorms, university center, cafeteria, gym) of ECU during classroom times and leave town during their leisure time. Staying in the Ada community naturally leads to a more educated and potentially more productive community of both younger and older adults which results in a healthy community.

Suggestions to grow the ECU-Ada community relationship include courses that provide more hands-on experience, increasing community contributions and outreach (thus increasing ECU visibility), and continuing education may help invite more established members to the ECU campus. These type of contributions help develop connections to the various professions. Partnering with small businesses in courses, service learning opportunities or through internships to help develop specialized skills specific to area businesses could increase the likelihood of graduates becoming permanent members of the community. In order to grow the ECU-community partnership, ECU needs to continue to develop rapport with the Ada Jobs Foundation, Chickasaw Nation, and other community representatives.

These steps would help add ECU monetary contributions to the community in the form of increased sales, sales tax, and housing rentals for example but also home ownership and increased revenue flow and sustainable community health when graduates become a perpetual part of the community. Faculty, staff and students who serve in the Ada community help facilitate the growth of the campus-community relationship and need continued support. For example, Greeks and other various campus organizations help out in the community through volunteering and activities that raise money such as the Pontotoc Animal Welfare Society (PAWS) and many church-sponsored Pontotoc County food banks.

Lessons Learned

For the past few years, ECU has placed an increased focus on student-faculty involvement, as well as retention and graduation rates. Tiger Alert is a retention management component used across the ECU campus and is designed to help identify students who may be at-risk. At-risk students are sought out in order to provide necessary resources and referrals to help them succeed academically. Beginning in 2016 thanks to a Title III grant, select ECU faculty have received stipends each semester for developing and implementing retention projects designed to increase student engagement in and out of the classroom thereby increasing the likelihood of student success in the classroom. University student retention rates as reported for 2017 were 91.8% and 90.0% for spring and fall 2017 semesters, respectively. Also, thanks to a Strengthening the Culture program at ECU, select faculty members received paid stipends in 2017 to incorporate student research in the classroom, providing students with valuable hands-on experience and research exposure. ECU must continue to support such measures focused on increasing student retention and completion rates.

ECU has recently looked at improving fiscal health in response to state budget decreases by analyzing programs for cost-effectiveness and taking actions such as to discontinue nursing program offerings at the University Center of Southern Oklahoma. However, ECU has also restructured programs such as the ECU General Studies degree and implemented plans to begin offering new programs at ECU such as gaining approval to offer the Master of Education in School

Psychometry in 2019. These efforts show the university is not just looking at “trimming the fat” but also looking at new ways to grow the university to meet a changing job market.

ECU faculty and staff listed salary and employee retention as important contributors to their morale as well as developing an increased sense of community amongst the ECU family. In fiscal year 2017-18, there were an average of 435 full time positions at ECU and a total of 65 separations, for a 15% turnover rate. In terms of faculty salary, according to “Salaries in The Oklahoma State System of Higher Education 2016-2017” published by the Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education (OSRHE), the average salary of a full professor, associate professor, and assistant professor at ECU was \$69,637; \$56,722 and \$53,196 respectively, below the averages (\$77,994; \$62,781; \$54,787) in all three categories for average salaries paid all full time faculty at regional 4-year universities in Oklahoma and these salaries ranked 7th, 8th, and 6th respectively out of the 11 regional universities in Oklahoma. For comparison, ECU’s nearest competitor Southeastern Oklahoma State University (SOSU) ranked 3rd, 4th, and 3rd out of the 11 regional universities.

Additionally, when examining the average staff benefits paid full time faculty for 2016-2017, ECU ranked 11th out of 11 in total benefits worth \$12,337, compared to the average of \$18,537. For comparison, SOSU ranked 2nd (\$23,396). In average total (salary + benefits) compensation, ECU ranked 8th (\$68,397) out of the 11 regional universities for 9/10-month faculty average total compensation and 6th (\$95,069) out of 10 for 11/12 month-faculty (one university didn’t have any 11/12-month faculty). For comparison, SOSU ranked 1st and 2nd, respectively.

In fall 2017, the university purchased access to the College and University Professional Association (CUPA) database of salary, supplemental salary and course relief, discipline (by IPEDS CIP code), rank, gender, race/ethnicity, age and years in rank to compare salaries with peer universities. The results of the data analysis is provided in the table below.

Job Category	Below Minimum	Low	Very Low
Faculty	24%	17%	4%
Administration	27%	35%	0%
Professional Staff	16%	29%	7%
Non-Professional Staff	36%	9%	9%

In the spring of 2018, the university participated in the The Chronicle of Higher Education Great Colleges to Work For survey. The university scored positively in the following areas: I understand how my job contributes to this institution's mission, I have a good relationship with my supervisor/department chair, I am given the responsibility and freedom to do my job, and at this institution people are supportive of their colleagues regardless of their heritage or background. The university scored negatively in the following areas: there is a sense that we’re on the same

team at this institution, our recognition and awards programs are meaningful to me, and I am paid fairly for my work.

Investments in collaborative research and instrumentation have resulted in increased publicity and community awareness of opportunities available at ECU. In the ECU Strategic Plan 2013-2017, one of the four campus wide goals was that “ECU will strive for excellence in its collaborative efforts in economic development, community stewardship and tribal relationships.” In July 2016, The Oka’ Institute opened its doors on the ECU campus with the purpose of bridging the gap between sustainable water management and economic development in the state of Oklahoma. The Oka’ Institute, through ECU partnerships with the surrounding community, has helped fund water research opportunities to various ECU students and faculty along with collaboration with the EPA Robert S. Kerr Environmental Research Center. The Oka’ Institute also hosts an annual conference highlighting water management projects and research in the state of Oklahoma. By giving additional support to The Oka’ Institute, for example by providing additional research funds/stipends that would fund additional faculty or provide time off from faculty teaching duties to help support The Oka’ Institute mission, ECU can highlight the importance of the ECU/Chickasaw Nation/The Oka’ Institute mission to the state government and the citizens of Oklahoma.

In April 2015, the Raniyah Ramadan Center for Undergraduate Research and Learning (CURL) was opened and featured two laboratories for biology and one each for chemistry and environmental health science. This research facility contains various instruments and is used by numerous College of Health and Sciences faculty to promote undergraduate research. The CURL lab has helped ECU to continue to emphasize undergraduate research learning experiences, provide hands-on experience thereby increasing visibility in the surrounding community and the state at research conferences by providing additional research space and modern instrumentation for faculty and the students they mentor. The ECU campus has a need for continued and additional support in faculty research funding in order to grow the university image as not just an excellent student-centered teaching university but one with valuable research contributions not only as a primary Oklahoma water policy research institution but also in relevant areas as well.

National Trends/External Picture

Institutions all across the United States are dealing with issues related to campus morale. For example, the University of Kansas reported that 55% of faculty and 49% of staff seriously considered leaving the university in the past year. Concerns about salary and lack of raises in recent years and the ability to participate in professional development were noted.

Nationally, the average satisfaction rate among university students, faculty, and staff is between 70% and 80%. However, a survey conducted by the University of Missouri System in 2016 found that only two-third of their campus population (students, faculty, and staff) felt comfortable or very comfortable, while 60% of their faculty and staff have seriously considered leaving. The most common reason for wanting to leave cited by both their faculty and staff was low salary. One of the suggestions resulting from the MU survey was for a mechanism to evaluate administrators and supervisors.

Funding shortage appears to be a common cause of low morale in universities across the country. In a 2018 interview, the president of the University of North Dakota blamed a 20% budget cut

imposed by the state legislature as the driver of low morale on his campus. The president himself had recently interviewed for a new job at a Florida school and was shortlisted.

Similarly, a 2016 survey conducted by the University of Wisconsin-Madison suggested that more than 90% of its faculty members were dejected by recent state funding budget cuts. Almost 70% of the survey respondents have been approached by recruiters for other jobs. Another important cause for low morale revealed by this survey was a new tenure policy that made it easier for the university to layoff faculty for financial reasons. Over 70% of the faculty cited this policy change as the reason for their low enthusiasm for working at UW-Madison. Measures adopted by the university to address low campus morale included reducing pay gaps with comparable institutions, tackling inequalities within the campus, and conducting employee appreciation programs.

Strategic Themes

ECU must remain committed to developing and sustaining a student-centered culture focused on student success and preparation for the future. To achieve this goal, ECU must also be committed to maintaining a healthy campus morale, including students, faculty, staff and a positive relationship with the surrounding community. This means ECU must be prepared to meet the following challenges:

- Appropriate resources and facility space must be allocated to maintain and grow the morale of ECU students, faculty, staff and the surrounding community despite budget challenges to the higher education system in Oklahoma.
- Promote and improve communication of and participation in ECU campus club, social, cultural and sporting events and entertainment.
- Sponsor and encourage innovative teaching pedagogy in response to changing trends and new technological resources to enhance student academic experience and faculty professional development.
- Ensure ECU faculty and staff are retained by improving campus comradery, salaries, flexibility, encouraging engagement and collaboration.
- Evaluate and modify current programs to encourage and increase hands-on experience, local business and community involvement (Ada Jobs Foundation, Chickasaw Nation, others as appropriate) based on a changing economy and marketable skill demands.

Options and Projected Costs

The issue of campus safety is very important since students need to be provided a safe, nurturing environment and needs to be improved by assessing the campus to locate areas trafficked or frequented by students that are not well lit at night and then adding or enhancing the lighting in those areas. This important step likely will only require funds less than \$50,000 to achieve. Maintaining a higher visibility by campus police is an additional option that should be examined. In regards to campus events and entertainment, heavier advertising or promotion of campus events through social media, a user-friendly ECU website, and email can help better connect students to

the variety of campus organizations and array of events that occur throughout the semester. Devoting resources to this issue could range from \$50,000- \$100,000 depending upon the steps taken to resolve the issues. The university also can allocate additional grant funds (and continue current allocation) to subsidize student functions and encourage student organization activities. Even an amount less than \$10,000 would go a long way toward increasing activities. ECU should explore the option of creating a student participation incentive program. (Ex. Campus Connect or something similar managed by a student leadership organization).

Cafeteria upgrades will provide students a better dining experience (low to medium cost, hard to project \$ amounts) or ECU could choose to build a new cafeteria by purchasing new or using existing space (medium to high cost, hard to project \$ amounts). Despite some student complaints, there are actually a good variety of options available in the cafeteria. Another option available is to combine the university center and cafeteria, so that students looking to eat, relax or exercise could be centralized to a greater degree instead of dispersing them. Creating a better central hub would allow greater student interaction and the feeling of belonging to a happening campus rather than feeling more isolated as if nothing is going on. ECU should explore the option of aligning with one of the area fast food restaurants such as Taco Bell or Chick-Fil-a to add in a smaller restaurant version, and also explore the option of adding a smaller version of a 24-hour convenience store. These could be added to a renovated/new cafeteria. These are similar to burger and smoothie shops and stores that have been built in other regional Oklahoma universities. This step would also increase community partnerships.

Staff and faculty morale and employee retention must be improved by providing raises which are not only consistent with other regional university salaries but help offset rising inflation. According to the outcomes of the CUPA data comparisons by Resource Allocation Committee, based on FY17 data, to bring faculty and staff salaries up to peer institutions it would cost approximately \$1.2 million. Improving scheduling flexibility for staff on non-essential days will also increase employee morale. Faculty morale will be improved by maintaining (at a minimum) or increasing (optimal) in-house professional development opportunities through paid stipends, encouragement and recognition of new course pedagogy (and allowing flexibility in evaluations in which new pedagogy is used) and through increased in-house collaborative grant opportunities.

Another means of improving faculty and staff morale is through promoting employee engagement. Appreciation events and other campus activities can enhance comradery and help reduce turnover for both staff and faculty. Employees feeling engaged with their jobs are more likely to perform better, which in turn can also improve student performances. The Human Resources department can play an active role in coordinating the engagement events.

In order to grow the ECU-Ada community relationship, appropriate ECU representatives need to continue to meet with representatives from the Ada Jobs Foundations, the Chickasaw Nation, and seek out meetings with other community service organizations in order to understand the primary types of degreed employees that will be needed by the community over the next 1-5 years and beyond. In this way, potential new programs at ECU may be tied to the needs of the community. In the past five years, the United States has launched initiatives designed to improve the global competitiveness of Americans in the areas of Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) to meet the growing needs in these areas, and these initiatives trickle down to the state and regional levels. Increasing STEM degree options at ECU should be a primary focus in order to meet with emerging job demands in both the community and throughout the state. Establishment of an

engineering program at ECU has been examined as a means to increase enrollment while also increasing graduates in a growing need area in Oklahoma. It has been estimated that the establishment of an engineering program at ECU would initially cost about \$2 million. Facilities would be required for sufficient lab space and proper equipment. It is likely that it will be necessary to build and create additional space to house the ECU STEM programs. Although this is probably a multi-million dollar step, it could lead to overall growth of the university.

Short and Long-Term Plans

In the short term, several tasks can be undertaken to improve morale:

- Create an ad hoc committee responsible for addressing morale that develop and execute specific and strategies with measurable outcomes.
- Provide additional social activities and activity support at varying times and encourage participation from students, faculty/staff and community members.
- Explore the option of creating a student participation incentive program. For example, Campus Connect or something similar managed by a student leadership organization.
- Work with local community leaders to increase business hours to accommodate students' needs/wants. Explore the option and finances of bringing in a fast food restaurant and convenience store, whether full or small scale.
- Address campus safety issues (lighting, visibility) and explore building a new cafeteria/university center/convenience store to create a more centralized student hub.
- Begin incremental increases in faculty/staff salaries and phase in over a 5-year period.
- Explore additional non-monetary means of compensating faculty and staff. This includes new pedagogy research incentives.
- Encourage teaching opportunities that would benefit the local community such as internships or volunteerism.

Long term tasks to improve morale include:

- Make the University more of a "community" atmosphere where everyone understands their contribution to the mission of ECU.
- Create a culture of security with increase transparency of funding decisions.
- Build a culture where students, faculty and staff feel valued to increase retention.
- Bring faculty/staff salaries up to peer institution medians.