Fermilab Diversity Focus Groups
Summary Report

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This report provides a summary of 23 focus groups conducted between November 2008 and January 2009 with Fermilab employees and users.

Purpose of the Focus Groups

The purpose of the focus groups was to further explore the issues raised by the report of the Committee on the Status of Women in Physics (CSWP) and the Committee on Minorities (COM) of the American Physical Society (APS) on their visit to Fermilab on May 20-21, 2008. That visit included conversations with 47 self-selected participants and raised a number of important issues regarding diversity and workplace issues at Fermilab. The report can be found at http://www.fnal.gov/pub/diversity/files/APS_Report.pdf

The APS report called for Fermilab to use its leadership role in the high-energy physics community as an opportunity to become a model environment for women and minority physicists and engineers. Fermilab Director Pier Oddone responded to the report with a commitment to ensure that Fermilab provide an inclusive, respectful, and supportive workplace for all employees.

The focus groups were designed to explore a wide range of issues affecting the working environment of the laboratory and the type of future that employees and users would like to see with regard to an inclusive and supportive workplace. The results of the focus groups do not constitute an official survey. They were not an attempt to either validate or refute the findings of the APS report but an effort to explore these issues more systematically with groups representative of all laboratory employees and users.

Focus Group Methodology

The focus groups were organized so as to provide a representative sample of the full range of Fermilab employees and users. Employees and users at the lab were divided into the following 12 job classifications:

- Managers and supervisors
- Technicians
- Administration and clerical
- Craft and service workers
- Administration supervisors and professionals
- Research associates, associate scientists, and scientist I’s
- Scientist II and III’s
- Engineers
- Computer Professionals
- Regular Users
- Post docs

- Grad students.

For each classification, two focus groups were planned, one limited to women and minorities and one representing the total population for that category. All participants were invited based on random selection. Sixteen people were selected at random from within the job classification and invited to each focus group, with the goal of achieving participation by eight to 12 individuals. Where fewer than eight individuals signed up for groups, alternates were invited. Focus group participants were invited by an outside consultant, The Perspectives Group. Their identities were not shared with Fermilab management, or with anyone at Fermilab.

Ultimately, 23 focus groups were conducted, with no separate focus group for the regular user population. In addition, several private conversations took place, for a total of 187 participants.

During the course of the focus groups, issues arose that were not originally anticipated. While the focus groups maintained the main focus of managing diversity throughout, groups raised and explored additional concerns regarding management effectiveness and general employee support as part of the process.

Focus Group Results

The individuals who participated in the focus groups were friendly, engaged, and open in their observations. The groups discussed many important and challenging topics, and individuals shared their opinions largely without reservation. An important part of the process was the promise not to identify any individuals by name or to assign any comments to particular individuals or groups. Summaries of the focus groups were prepared and shared with participants prior to making them public. Individuals were able to request deletion of comments they felt might serve to identify them. A number of participants did so, but none of the deletions greatly changed the nature of the conversations themselves. The summaries omit any reference that could identify individuals. They also simplify elements of the discussion and personal stories to focus on key points and to improve readability. All 23 summaries are available at http://www.fnal.gov/pub/diversity/focus_groups.shtml

In addition to the focus groups, a number of conversations were held with individuals who were unable to attend or wished to share additional observations privately. The results of these conversations are not included in any summaries, but were used to inform these findings.

Introduction to the Findings

It is important to note that the majority of the focus group participants said many positive things. It became clear through these conversations that Fermilab is its own greatest asset. It is widely recognized by employees as a great place to work because of its unique mission, setting, people, and relatively relaxed atmosphere. Overall, people get along and enjoy working with each other. While participants identified all of these positive themes, the focus groups were designed to address the challenges and issues

related to working at Fermilab, and as such, conversations focused predominantly on what does not work well versus what does work well. Many of the participants asked that this report specifically point out that this focus on the challenges should not be perceived as a statement that Fermilab is a negative workplace.

That being said, there are real challenges and issues at Fermilab that should be addressed. Fermilab is an extremely diverse workplace. Employees represent a wide range of duties, skills, backgrounds, cultures, and educational levels. The breadth of experiences and attitudes they presented in the focus groups regarding Fermilab represented this diversity. For virtually any issue discussed, completely opposite opinions surfaced within the broad range of focus group participants. The following key themes have been identified as those that were of high import to participants and where there was a great deal of congruence across the 23 groups.

This is a high-level summary that matches the general level of the discussions. It does not explore any of these issues in great detail. The summaries themselves contain individual comments and concerns. The level of detail presented here is sufficient to signal the presence of challenges and to indicate a sense of priority for addressing them. However, to solve these problems will require a deeper understanding than was possible in the focus groups. A companion recommendations report identifies issues that would appear to require action and makes some recommendations about what might be done to address them.

Key Findings

The Future of Fermilab

In recent years, the lack of a clear future mission and the uncertainty of the annual budget have resulted in challenging conditions for Fermilab employees. Participants repeatedly pointed to these conditions as a serious challenge to employee morale. Details of these conditions are well understood by management and will not be elaborated here. However, it is important not to underestimate the impact the budget uncertainty has had and continues to have on Fermilab employees.

Fermilab Culture

At this point, partly due to budget uncertainties and the lack of a clear vision for the future, Fermilab lacks a definable central culture. Participants regularly pointed to numerous conflicting norms, and described by them in the following ways:

- The idealized Wilson/Lederman past, where science was paramount, the laboratory determined its own future, employees forged strong social and intellectual ties, and strong physicists provided strong leadership
- The overly bureaucratic Department of Energy, where science is perceived to take a back seat, priorities change constantly, the laboratory does not determine its future, and paperwork overwhelms the system
- The "corporate" laboratory organization, exemplified by Human Resources, where the focus is on avoiding lawsuits, with little perceived understanding of the work of the lab or the needs of the individual employee

- The traditional vertical workplace culture, where non-scientist employees seek modern-day benefits, pay, and advancement opportunities and a traditional pecking order is observed; juxtaposed with the horizontal science workplace culture where everyone is equal, science is more important than pay and position, and a robust and heated argument is part of the daily program.

All of these descriptions are stereotypes, but they provide useful insights into the influences shaping employee attitudes and the workplace environment. A main challenge for Fermilab is that all of these different cultures exist simultaneously, and that a larger unifying Fermilab culture–one that some say once existed--appears to be absent. “The team spirit is gone,” was a common concern.

Diversity in General

- Based on the focus groups, there is no evidence of a recognizable systemic bias toward any minority group at Fermilab.
- Few minority participants believed that issues or concerns they have faced at Fermilab resulted from their minority status.
- The vast majority of participants indicated that they enjoy working at Fermilab and describe it as a respectful workplace.
- The overwhelming diversity of the Fermilab workforce was recognized as the key factor in the positive environment for diversity. Participants recognized that there is no room for bias in a system where virtually everyone is from a different place and background.
- It was difficult to identify specific Fermilab policies or procedures that were responsible for this positive environment. In fact, some formal responses Fermilab has taken regarding diversity issues were perceived as overly punitive (suspensions for unintentional infractions, dismissals for first-time offenses) and unevenly applied (different rules for physicists) rather than as good policy, and were noted to sometimes have a “chilling effect” on relationships at the lab.
- Participants reported isolated instances of bias, including religious and cultural issues. These were largely described as interpersonal, except in one case. One department was described as having regular office events outside Fermilab where individual dietary and religious practices of some of the employees are not taken into account, restricting those individuals’ ability to participate.
- Limiting the diversity issue to scientists, it is clear that women have traditionally had a much more difficult time than men in the field of high-energy physics. Although progress has occurred, women continue to face challenges in this male-dominated field.
- It was further noted that the lack of female and African-American role models in high-energy physics makes it more difficult for Fermilab to attract and promote these candidates. It also makes it more difficult for these minorities to get the type of support and assistance they need once in the field, participants said.

Physicists vs. Nonphysicists

- There is a two-tier culture at Fermilab. Physicists work differently, view their jobs differently, and treat each other differently from the way most others at the laboratory do.
- Most participants did not see this as an unusual or ineffective arrangement as it is, after all, a physics laboratory.
- Extreme unprofessional behavior by some physicists was noted as a real occurrence, but most participants pointed to it as the exception rather than the rule. Such events, however, make a significant impact on the employees involved and quickly enter the lore of the laboratory.
- One common concern expressed among non-scientists is that physicists can "get away" with things that other employees do not, and are perceived as rarely being called to task for unprofessional behavior or ineffective performance. Participants felt that this lack of consequences serves to perpetuate the cases of unprofessional behavior that do occur.

Management Effectiveness

- There is wide variation in the effectiveness of management. The impact of this is magnified at Fermilab because individual managers have significant flexibility in determining the work environment for their direct employees. Most participants who described a positive work experience could point to an effective supervisor, while those with poor supervisors almost always had negative experiences. This was noted in many cases where a single individual discussed dramatically different experiences working at Fermilab working under different supervisors.
- Participants expressed concern that many managers lack effective management skills, experience or desire.
- Participants pointed to project management as a significant weakness. There is often limited understanding of overall schedules and coordination. Much focus is placed on giving orders to just "get it done" without regard to competing priorities, realistic constraints, and resources.
- Participants noted that many individuals in management positions were simply not suited to manage people, and their real skills and passion were with the science.
- Participants largely felt that little overall effort is geared toward identifying and improving or removing poor managers.

Performance Review System

- The performance review system is not being implemented as designed, and it is having negative effects. People described the system and its results as greatly de-motivating.
- Performance reviews generally do not provide the employee an accurate picture of their performance nor provide a tie to salary increases that is perceived as fair.
- It is largely perceived that the system pushes everyone "to the middle" and is not an accurate reflection of individual performance.
- The common message employees report as receiving is "I think you are doing a great job, but I can't give you that score or that raise," or "I put you in for a great review but it got overturned."

- There were also concerns about people at the top of the pay scale having nowhere else to go, while people at the bottom are provided significant salary increases to get them closer to the middle of the range regardless of their actual performance.
- It was noted that as a result of this perceived lack of value in the system, many managers and employees simply do not take the performance reviews seriously.
- There is an overall perception that there is little funding or opportunity for employees to be fairly rewarded for their work.

Employee Support and Mentoring

- Many participants described a workplace that provides little direct employee support or career management. Participants pointed to lack of sufficient orientation and lack of personal attention as issues.
- Participants felt that one needs to be very aggressive to advance at Fermilab. One common perception is that less aggressive employees are passed over and given lower raises because they won't complain.
- Participants in almost every focus group pointed to the "15th Floor" as ineffective in assisting employees and at times even harmful in approaching employees and issues. Many people indicated that they would never take their issues to HR, fearing a worse outcome, or a negative stigma within their own group for having gone there. Some said they have gone to HR for help or information and not received a satisfactory response. A number expressed the perception that HR exists only to keep the laboratory from getting sued.
- Overall, there was a lack of uniform understanding of many policies and procedures. It was noted that policies have changed and that the materials people have are no longer valid. Information is available on the Web site, but many felt it was out of date and not easy to use.
- Participants noted that the initial employee orientation is not sufficient. It presents a lot of information all at once and largely out of context for brand-new employees. Employees need refresher courses after they learn their way around the laboratory.
- Many participants indicated that access to mentors would be a great benefit. Potential mentors agreed, but wondered how they would find the time. People wanted access to mentors who had faced similar career paths and choices, and who were not direct supervisors.

Family-Friendly Workplace

- Fermilab is inconsistent or does not provide flexible work schedules, family leave, part-time work, job sharing, and other family-friendly policies. The policies themselves are not clear to many employees, and leaving decisions up to individual supervisors results in an extremely uneven application. A number of people feel these opportunities are not implemented fairly.
- Employees recognize that not all jobs lend themselves to these opportunities, but want to see more clarity and uniformity in their application.
- Participants also pointed to sick leave policy as an issue. Though employees are provided sufficient sick leave, its use is highly regulated. Employees described

being written up if they take three days sick leave in a quarter regardless of the situation. As a result, people come in when they are sick (a problem for fellow employees) and often take vacation when sick to avoid being called out for abuse of sick leave. Parents complain of not being able to use sick leave to care for ill children or take children to doctors or the hospital.
- Maternity leave was not well understood. The lack of a paternity leave policy was also pointed to as an issue.
- The vacation donation policy to assist employees with maternity leave or medical emergencies was noted as a particularly helpful program.

Staff Capacity
- Fermilab has an older workforce. There were relatively few younger employees in the random sample participating in the focus groups. Many participants had worked at the laboratory for their entire careers, and it was common for individuals to have 20 years and more service.
- There are many people at the laboratory who perform tasks without backup or plans for succession. Some indicated that employees resist sharing knowledge or cross-training as a protection against being laid off. Many told stories of employees retiring or leaving taking with them significant institutional knowledge that could not be replaced.
- Balancing workloads was raised as a significant issue. Many employees pointed to an overwhelming workload due to lack of staff and unfilled positions, while others indicated they had virtually nothing to do. Many pointed to the only reward for competence as being more work.

Social Interaction
- The loss of some historical locations and opportunities to interact was seen as harming the work environment and the effectiveness of the science. Several participants pointed to the lack of gathering places where ideas can be shared, particularly in the afternoon and evening after the cafeteria closes.
- People who work outside Wilson Hall often feel isolated from the laboratory and their coworkers.
- Younger workers and grad students in particular felt the lack of opportunity to interact with each other.

The User Community
- The user community faces many different issues from regular Fermilab employees. The user community itself is highly diverse and presents unique challenges.
- Many users move in and out of Fermilab without any strong connection to the laboratory, but they can have a significant impact on other users and employees. These interactions are not well monitored, and it is not clear to some how best to handle issues at Fermilab with individuals who report elsewhere.
- Graduate students face a particularly difficult challenge trying to forge a career in high-energy physics. They feel it is difficult to understand how to navigate the laboratory and get access to the resources needed to succeed. A number of

participants pointed to promising candidates leaving the field because they did not see a future.

- Much of the user community is dominated by the academic culture as students and professors, and there is not always a clear coordination or synergy with the work and workplace at Fermilab. Participants pointed to lack of accountability as a significant problem.
- User participants pointed to the lack of new projects and a clear future for Fermilab as a real obstacle to training and supporting new American physicists.