

Employees Join the Evolution with Ideas, Input

Editor's Note: Since the Workplace of Choice initiative was launched formally in November, steering committee members have been working to solicit ideas and input from faculty and staff to understand their thinking on what it will take to evolve the UT Health Science Center into a Workplace of Choice. The Leader is pleased to play an integral role in communicating with employees about this important initiative and engaging them in the evolution itself. The following information — presented in a question-and-answer format — is provided to enhance everyone's understanding of the initiative.

What is a Workplace of Choice?

The steering committee defines a Workplace of Choice as one in which people feel valued, are passionate about their work and take pride in the institution. Several organizations around the country designate certain employers as being "Workplaces of Choice" according to criteria such as turnover rates and employee satisfaction, etc. The UT Health Science Center is working to become a Workplace of Choice — regardless of whether we ever receive that formal designation from another party. We'll know we have achieved our goal when our personnel consider this to be a Workplace of Choice.

How did this initiative begin?

Shortly after James T. Willerson, M.D., became president of the UT Health Science Center (about four years ago), several changes came about that were the first seeds sown toward an enhanced work environment. For example, *The Leader* was created as a monthly publication to enhance communication and recognize accomplishments, and *News on the Go* began appearing twice a week to share timely news and information electronically. The former Chili-Fest event was reinstated and renamed Founders' Fun Fest as an annual "thank you" event for all faculty, staff and students. More recently, an Executive Budget Committee was formed to look at campus-wide financial issues and budget priorities. Over the last two years, nearly 1,000 faculty and staff leaders took a special training called "Leadership in Times of Stress and Change" to enhance their leadership skills, and the training continues to be offered on a quarterly basis. All of these are ingredients for a workplace of choice.

In time, both Willerson and Michael McKinney, M.D., senior executive vice

Friday, March 18, is the deadline for you to go to <http://www.uthouston.edu/workplaceofchoice> and participate in the brief, confidential baseline survey to help us gauge our future progress in becoming a Workplace of Choice.

president, recognized the need to do more to support and recognize employees and foster pride in the institution. McKinney appointed a steering committee in September, and the new initiative was launched in November.

Who serves on the steering committee and what is their role?

The steering committee members serve as advocates for a Workplace of Choice.

Members meet regularly to identify needs and opportunities — largely based on input from faculty and staff. The committee then implements or recommends implementation of new activities, programs or policies to help create a better place of work. Members include: Marsha Brody-Silva, Human Resources; Jane Brust, Public Affairs; Sam Hester, WorkLife Program; Michael Jimenez, Human Resources; Ronda Lowe, University Classified Staff Council; Peter Martin, Diversity Council; Gwin Morris, Ph.D., Public Affairs; Linda Nieman, Ph.D., InterFaculty Council; Arlene Staller, J.D., Legal Affairs; Sherry Wilson, Employee Assistance and WorkLife Programs.

What has been accomplished?

The initial focus has been publicizing the concept of a Workplace of Choice and soliciting ideas and input from faculty and staff. The kickoff luncheon in November generated several ideas from 200 faculty and staff leaders. Those ideas were posted online in January so that all personnel could see what was recommended, rank the importance of those recommendations and voice their own ideas. Also in January, a first-ever campus-wide Wellness Fair was held to offer employees free health screenings and information to help them take care of themselves.

How can faculty and staff participate in the initiative?

Through Friday, March 18, all personnel can participate in a brief, confidential baseline survey — which will be repeated each year — so that the university can gauge progress in our evolution to a workplace of choice. Go

online to <http://www.uthouston.edu/workplaceofchoice> to access the survey. It takes only a few minutes to complete.

In the meantime, everyone can take part by "walking the talk." Each of us can do more each day to demonstrate respect and appreciation for our colleagues, model a positive attitude, work out our differences, and grow professionally and personally. Finally, each of us can stay informed about the university — its challenges and accomplishments, which are accomplishments for all of us.

What happens next?

In the next few weeks, responses from the baseline survey and the earlier "ranking" feedback will be made available to all personnel. Responses from the "ranking" feedback have been withheld so as not to influence the baseline survey. The steering committee will review and discuss all data and formulate some initial action steps. In the meantime, focus groups will take place around campus for interested faculty and staff to discuss specific ideas for creating a Workplace of Choice. By early summer, an action plan will be written, recommended to executive leadership and communicated. And, you can watch for a communications survey sponsored by the Office of Public Affairs, and let us know more about how you prefer to receive institutional information and what kind of information you want to receive more often.

It seems as if parking and pay raises are the two biggest issues around here. Couldn't we become a Workplace of Choice by addressing those two items?

Providing pay raises and convenient, affordable parking would not by themselves make this a Workplace of Choice — though they would certainly enhance employee morale.

It's important to point out that parking rates at several of our buildings — including UCT and OCB, among others — are about 60 percent of the Texas Medical Center parking rates elsewhere. Parking is a complex, high-cost issue that is being examined through a Texas Medical Center-wide park-

ing plan now in development. Meanwhile, employees are encouraged to ride the rail or join a van pool to decrease their parking costs.

In December, the university allocated \$4 million to one-time merit awards for deserving faculty and staff. Also during this year, more than 10 percent of the university's faculty and staff have received a salary increase. The university's Compensation Committee is considering a recommendation for faculty and staff pay raises in the new fiscal year, but programs or personnel would have to be reduced to reallocate money for the pay raises.

How can we evolve into a Workplace of Choice with the probability of further budget cuts for the next two fiscal years?

The UT Health Science Center has gone through some tough times in recent years, but we also have much to be proud of in the way of new buildings, enhanced patient care, new research discoveries, excellent educational opportunities, increased philanthropy and increased State support. However, the State of Texas continues to struggle for sufficient funds for all the priorities of state government — including institutions of higher education and health care like the UT Health Science Center.

While compensation and other initiatives will require funding, we also must look at how we communicate, how we treat each other, and how we resolve issues — low-cost initiatives that can improve the quality of our work life. The evolution will not occur overnight, but we are already on our way.

The university's goal is to create a better work environment — regardless of how big our budget is. Our goals are to do the best we can with whatever budget we receive and to be courteous to one another while doing it. We will make the case for more funding but, ultimately, we must perform in all areas of our mission with what the Legislature gives us, which is money from the taxpayers.

Where can I go for more information?

Visit <http://www.uthouston.edu/worklife/woc/index.html>, the Join the Evolution! Web site, for more information and updates on the Workplace of Choice initiative. Also, stay tuned to *News on the Go* and *The Leader*, and watch for announcements of the focus groups and other opportunities for you to participate in the process of becoming a Workplace of Choice. ★

Dental Branch Enjoys the 'Reunion of the Century'

By Erika E. Durham, Public Affairs

Speeches had been written and a program was planned but, as soon as alumni of The University of Texas Dental Branch at Houston arrived at "The Centennial Bash," it was hard to get a word in edge-wise. Once the reuniting started, there was no stopping. It definitely turned out to be the "Reunion of the Century."

The Feb. 18 gathering drew more than 500 alumni, faculty, staff and students to the George R. Brown Convention Center. The bash was held as part of the Greater Houston Dental Society's Star of the South meeting.

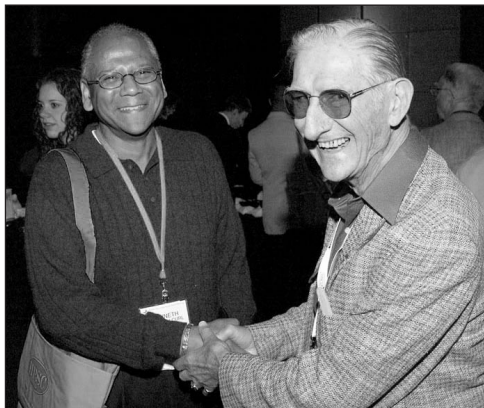
Dental Branch Dean Catherine M. Flaitz, D.D.S., summed it up best. "I had much more of a speech planned," she said, over the conversations of the excited crowd of reunion attendees. "But I see that this is not the place for a speech. This crowd is in a partying mood and that is just as important."

Flaitz rallied the crowd with words about their participation in the future of the Dental Branch. "We are in a tremendous city, in the largest medical center in the world, where we have the best dental alumni of any out there," she said. "I am going to need the help of each and every one of you in our efforts to bring this dental school to be number one in the country."

Jerry Long, D.D.S., president-elect of the UTDB Alumni Association, echoed Flaitz's challenge of raising the school to the number one position and asked the alumni to stay actively involved in the institution's progress.

An oversized star, adorned with photos that could be removed and taken as party favors, created quite a buzz throughout the celebration. The star, constructed by Dental Branch Instructional Media team members John O'Black and Brian Schnupp, kept guests searching for familiar faces from their dental school days.

Influenced by the ideas and energy of Centennial Advisory Committee members, the event fostered a good time for all over food, drinks and music. For most, the real excitement was in finding long-lost class-



Kenneth Curl, D.D.S., left, class of 1980, was overjoyed to see one of his favorite former faculty members, Jack Levine, D.D.S., class of 1948. Curl, who operates a practice in The Woodlands, said Levine was the kind of instructor who not only taught, but also took the time to learn from his students. Photo by Brian Schnupp

mates, teachers and administrators with whom the good old days could be relived.

Kenneth Curl, D.D.S., class of 1980, who practices in The Woodlands, said he most enjoyed reuniting with former faculty members such as Jack Levine, D.D.S., and Zeb Poindexter Jr., D.D.S. "Dr. Poindexter was my family dentist. I remember when I was six years old and he gave me a tour of his dental office and

explained what he did. From that day forward I wanted to be a dentist," Curl said.

Greg Condrey, D.D.S., class of 1996, who practices dentistry in the Texas Medical Center, said although he has done a good job of staying in touch with his classmates, he still enjoyed the chance to see everyone at the bash. "In dental school you truly do meet friends that you will have for the rest of your life."

The School of Dental Hygiene, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, also was

represented well with alumni. Lano Rogers, class of 1995, said her fondest memories revolve around special moments outside of the classroom, such as a class trip taken to Sixth Street in Austin. She added that she will never forget the positive impressions that teachers like Donna Warren, associate professor of Periodontics, and classmates like Harold Henson, now an assistant professor of Dental Hygiene, had on her.

Attendees of the bash paused for a moment to recognize former staff member Ethel Hermosillo, who was employed at the Dental Branch for 50 years. The crowd applauded Hermosillo for her recent establishment of two endowments — one to the Dean's Excellence Fund and the other to the Employee Relations Committee (ERC).

Members of the ERC played a large role in the success of The Centennial Bash by helping with the set-up of the event and distribution of special coasters embossed with the Centennial mark.

And it was comforting for most to know that the purpose of the party — the historical milestone of the school — was not overlooked. A large walk-through exhibit was on display throughout the Star of the South meeting to showcase the school's historical highlights and special people. ★