

Q&A with Dean Harriet Nembhard

Hosted by the Engineering Staff Advisory Council on November 17, 2020

61 participants

1. **Welcome**

ESAC president Jacob Heiden thanked staff members for attending the Q&A and submitting questions or comments in advance. Jacob also acknowledged other ESAC councilors and advisors, as well as welcomed and thanked Dean Nembhard for her collaboration with staff since starting at University of Iowa.

Dean Nembhard reiterated thanks to staff members for being active, important parts of our college. She shared the importance of meeting and connecting with the people in our college – from staff to students to faculty. Most meetings have been virtual, so introductions haven't been as easy if we were all on campus. She appreciated ESAC's efforts in keeping staff connected and shared how she has invited ESAC to attend EAC meetings. She also shared her leadership philosophy and goals for a culture of leadership across the college.

2. **F&A:**

- **With the upcoming changes to F&A, what do you foresee are the employee benefits to being more connected to the college?**
- **We have heard from various staff members within the research centers that they have some concerns about job security. What can you share to help with the ambiguity?**
- **As the process of F&A evolves, how are staff voices being gathered and considered in the decision-making process?**
- **When can we expect to hear updates about the plans and how often will the FAQ be updated?**

Summary:

UI administration and CoE administration are working with Center Directors to align the F&A allocations with the standards used by the other colleges across campus and create new processes and financial control systems for the College. Central administration has said that this change has been discussed for years and is especially urgent under the new UI budget model. As we work through a new CoE budget process that is harmonized with the UI model, it will be designed to ensure that administrative accountability and responsibility is established within the Dean's Office and managed equitably across all centers, departments, faculty, and staff. Dean Nembhard said the changes will be thoughtfully carried out over time with her vision and values for the future of the college and that she foresees new learning and development opportunities.

She also stressed that this is an opportunity for the Center Directors to work closely with her and the university and college leadership to ensure that we are looking across the board at ways to effectively leverage our collective talents. She wants to see Center Directors being advocates for staff and helping build collaborations across centers, depts, and engineering administration. She said that a team of people can help staff adjust and *create* job security– including staff supervisors and managers, PIs, DEOs.

Much of the actual F&A change is being worked out by the College, UI President's office, the Provost Office and OVPR. Once the memorandums are completed, the gradual process of figuring out budgets, priorities and staffing models will begin. At that time faculty will be very involved in setting research priorities. Staff input will be critical for understanding skill sets, goals and interests to help with realignments as needed to meet the desired outcomes.

This transition will take place over time thanks to bridge funding to the College from UI administration for at least 5 years. The Dean's Office will communicate and update the FAQs as progress/decisions are made. Over the next year, the Dean will hold town halls twice per term for faculty and staff on the F&A realignment and the college's budget outlook.

3. Research Centers

- **Do you anticipate any restructuring or the creation of new positions to support and supervise the research centers?**

Summary:

The College has needs and strategies and we want to look across the whole to assess need and current staffing levels. It will take time to understand the needed staffing models as we outline new priorities. We will focus on using the staff that we currently have in new ways versus recruiting new staff in the short term. Staff can potentially rise career-wise and help meet the future needs of the College.

4. Staffing Questions

- **Recently, the college had to make some difficult decisions regarding furloughs and the cutting of several positions, and we have seen other staff members step up, such as Jason becoming the new Director of the Communications Center. What is the big picture plan moving forward? Does the college plan to fill the now vacant positions, will there be restructuring, etc.?**
- **Is there anything you can share regarding the process for furloughing or cutting positions?**

Summary:

The College had to make very tough decisions to furlough and to cut positions, but Dean Nembhard's hope is that no more positions will be cut. Apart from F&A discussions, there was initial worry that cuts might have to be made midyear due to additional university budget cuts, but that isn't the case at this point. As we realign effort we will look to staff for ideas and willingness to lean in to new opportunities. Growing staff and faculty will fundamentally depend on growing the college. At some point, we will need to have discussions about what size college we want to be including faculty student ratio, strengthening faculty and staff we do have, etc. There is five years of bridge funding so that we can take measures and make plans. The college will follow UI's procedures for furloughs if it is unavoidable.

5. College Morale

- **Given some of the challenges over the past year—Covid-19, the struggle against racial injustice, and lower enrollment numbers—do you have any strategies to raise morale?**

Summary:

2020 has been a challenge and filled with anxiety. Dean Nembhard is stressing community first and sends cards and messages of appreciation for those stepping up to help our colleagues and students . She also thinks it is important to prioritize sleep, exercise, and nutrition. Supervisors can lead by example with not emailing in evenings, remembering to say thank you, lessen demands, and understand the need for extensions. She has also made efforts to communicate HR resources such as leave and other accommodations. The College is having discussions how to support probational faculty which may indirectly help staff.

ESAC also works on promoting service such as food drives and social events. Dean Nembhard mentioned the importance of more casual activities like these to help build our college community.

6. Priorities

- **With changes in leadership and the challenges of the pandemic, there are a lot of new and sometimes conflicting ideas about ways to move the College forward. In a semi-ideal situation in which time, culture, and bureaucratic red tape are still constraints but funding is not, could you talk a little bit about:**
 - **Your three top priorities for 2020-2021. What specific changes/actions would you like to see occur within this time span at the College?**
 - **Your three top priorities for the next three to five years. Could you talk about what specific changes you'd like to see occur gradually at the College within the next 3 to 5 years?**

Summary:

Top three for this year: 1) We have to start with students, they are why we are here. We need to strengthen our graduate program, including the ability to make 4-year offers to every PhD student. For undergraduates, we have had to change lectures and labs to accommodate remote learning; that is an ongoing effort that continues to need interventions and innovation. We must also attend to the experiences and opportunities to be an 'engineer and something more' as well as work with student enrollment management to ensure we have class size needed for 2021.

2) DEI and community are a priority. The DEI Council has a new co-chair and new members. They submitted the ASEE diversity recognition program application yesterday. Beyond their work, we need to understand each other better. Dean Nembhard worked with last week's distinguished speaker, Rick Miller, as an example of these conversations.

3) Telling our story. We have compelling work and opportunities in the area of engineering for better health. She is working with faculty and researchers to identify what those opportunities are. She is also engaging the Engineering Advisory Board on building stronger industry and strategic partnerships. Both of these will be important in developing our capital campaign narrative.

In the next 3-5 years: 1) Becoming a destination— the college of engineering at UI is a place where people of all identities want to come because it is a cool community to join. 2) Having even more reasons to stay—because people can be more creative, more entrepreneurial, respond to grand challenges. We must also be able to improve our salary compensation. 3) Impact—how our infrastructure supports us to have impact, including on human health, climate change, environmental justice, and ethics in technology and AI.

7. Open Q&A

- **Open discussion and follow-ups**

Summary:

Communication is the important. Dean Nembhard understands this is general to say, but it's true. It's difficult in this distributed environment without impromptu meetings. This disconnection can add to the anxiety and uncertainty. We should make efforts to be in touch weekly and perhaps try to emulate some of our in person meetings; looking at new options for communication for the spring term. We're a small college and one of the reasons Dean Nembhard fell in love with Iowa is that she will get to know everyone. She wants everyone to have a direct connection to her. She reiterated that everyone has her email address and she is happy to receive other questions and comments. She may pull in other people to help but everyone--faculty, staff, and students—will get a response.

8. Wrap Up/Next Steps: 5 min

- **ESAC and Dean Nembhard will be scheduling a Q&A for next semester.**
- **ESAC will also be scheduling more informal events to stay connected**