

USP Staff Retreat, December 9, 2011

Feedback from staff

What worked well during the retreat?

- The fact that staff organized it; there was flexibility exercised on the actual day so that we didn't feel pressured; the combination of serious dialogue/discussion as well as fun activities that still allowed for interaction/dialogue; that it was inclusive and had staff at every level play a leadership role.
- It was a great balance of substance and relationship building.
- People took responsibility to make it our retreat and use the time in positive ways. The mix of arts and crafts, dancing, eating, playing the USP bingo game etc. made it easy to meet and get to know our colleagues. Great food, great place, comfortable setting etc. a lot of moving around is SO much better than sitting all day!
- The flexibility, easy/casual environment, interesting sessions, and dancing :-)
- Everyone participated the total flexibility based on group desires
- I think the whole retreat was excellent from start to finish! I appreciated the opportunity to get to know colleagues better through Bingo and have substantive conversations on topics of our own choosing led by our peers. I also liked the flexibility of the last afternoon session where we could engage in conversation or dance, and the movie trailer was hilarious! All in all, a great retreat.
- I think the relaxed format worked well--especially that there was no pressure to prepare or read anything (unless you wanted to) before the meeting. I think that this no pressure format really made people feel free to have fun and to be present.
- Flexibility to change agenda and made it relaxing
- Being flexible on the sessions and the schedule was helpful. I appreciated the impromptu dancing lessons from Jeff and the hip hop dance group's performance. It was nice to see that people felt comfortable enough around their colleagues to dance at a work event. The laid-back sessions like Kima's arts and crafts table also made the retreat feel like a real retreat from work. It was a nice break from end of year deadlines.
- Everything
- Flexible schedule; if some activities ran a bit long, time was adjusted on the back end without short cutting ensuing sessions. 2. Staff ownership; I confess to being skeptical about how well this would work, but staff coordinating the event, the session facilitators and, of course, staff worked well together, respected boundaries, and deferred to the wisdom and experience of colleagues in bringing together different elements.
- After such a long and stressful year of change and uncertainty I thought that the energy and structure of the retreat was perfect. It was relaxing, allowed many colleagues to shine, and provided opportunities for serious contemplation as well as fun. I really appreciated the variety of facilitators, the diversity of sessions and styles of interactivity, and Cristina's subtle and humble guidance throughout.
- The pre-retreat casual dinner was really nice and it was an excellent opportunity to get to know our colleagues better, both those from NYC and from Baltimore. Special thanks to Cristina and the SAG members for their dedication to make it happen and hard work to make it a success!

- The informality did not seem forced - there seemed to be genuine comradery, good spirits and sharing. People seemed to enjoy each other; and, people really had the opportunity to learn from each other. I also thought there was good participation across all kinds of job positions.
- The flexible use of time and openness to the entire range of staff ideas for how to spend the time worked well. It was astonishing how much substantive material was covered so effortlessly -- even while people were having fun. Or, maybe it was because they were having fun.

What could have worked out better?

- I think it had the right balance of focused discussion and more free flowing exchanges. Might have been interesting to have had an open forum at the end for staff to share take-aways from the day. But at the end of the day that wasn't a big drawback - just would have been interesting to have that exchange.
- The retreat was great.
- I can't think of anything right now.
- I wouldn't say necessarily better, but one idea I have is to give interactive group assignments (doesn't have to be work related, could be entertaining and fun) to have the group work together to achieve a certain result. I think this could be good for team/relationship building.
- ????
- Time capsule was a great idea in theory, but there simply wasn't time to work on it. If we're serious about doing that activity, I think it would have garnered more participation and been more meaningful as an actual time capsule if we built in time for it into the day, rather than leaving it up to people to participate. But again, the retreat was so great, that this was just another great idea that we didn't have time to fully delve into. I don't think this was problematic. Just a thought.
- While I enjoyed the staff-led sessions (especially the fun ones), I think that some professionally-led sessions on creating a more relaxed and healthier organizational culture might have had more weight and staying power.
- I realize that it wasn't possible to anticipate early on in the year what Finance's end of year deadlines were, but having the retreat on the last day when staff could make payment requests was a bit stressful because we had grantees sending us reports on Thursday and Friday and it was not possible to process the reports and payment requests without leaving the retreat early, working during the retreat, or working overtime from home.
- Nothing
- These events simply need to be longer. And not connecting the retreat to the holiday party was a real lost opportunity.
- Wouldn't change a thing other than trying to ensure that full USP participation could occur.
- If we had had one or two more people who had volunteered to lead a conversation, that would have been good as the groups in the afternoon could have been smaller.
- I wouldn't know. I haven't been to a retreat that worked that well.

Did you take away anything from our day together?

- That one can have stimulating and inspiring exchanges of ideas in a more informal and relaxed setting; that USP has a rich tapestry of staff expertise that we don't always get to tap into; time for reflection needs to happen more than once a year.
- Salsa moves!
- Definitely yes. The whole day was an enriching experience with the NY and Baltimore staffs coming together. I learned a lot from everyone!
- Cohesiveness, learning more about NY colleagues, and a better understanding of Campaign management from the group session on the relative topic.
- I learned a lot more about my colleagues, not just who they are, but their different styles and approaches to life
- I loved connecting with colleagues on a human level rather than our day to day frenetic pace of trying to get grants out the door, and with so many people always traveling and playing catch-up. I also got a lot of food for thought from the peer-led conversations.
- I now feel a renewed responsibility to make the organization a better place. I had given up a bit, but now feel hopeful that I can make things better just by having a good attitude.
- yes, less stress
- That team work does the best to make a retreat work and work well.
- I work with a tremendous group of bright, talented, energetic and creative folks! But I knew that already.
- After a trying year, I felt that despite all of the changes and uncertainty of the future that there's a core sensibility and sense of humor that unites us and will allow us to stick together and persist. People seemed to genuinely enjoy one another's company, too.
- We should use our staff's own expertise and resources more often; and, we should get together in an informal setting to learn from each other more frequently.
- Take-away: That I work with an exceptional group of people. Not that I didn't know that, but sometimes when one has her/his head in a computer screen or ear to a cell phone for too long...
- This is the first time that I feel part of the big USP team

This year, for the first time, we experimented with "peer discussion sessions". Did you find these sessions valuable?

- Great experiment which should be continued.
- Loved these. Would love to have this repeated for future retreats.
- Yes - there were several that were of interest to me and I like the idea of using our own staff as experts to lead these discussions.
- I didn't participate, but found the findings interesting and beneficial.
- I was not able to participate in any, but I liked hanging out with the people in my session. It was interesting how lots of people had similar feelings and were able to offer their counterparts solutions
- Yes! The conversations were very rich and nice to talk about some bigger issues that affect our work that we don't get to talk about everyday. However, how we apply it to our work remains to be seen. It would be great if we could get a staff-wide report out of some of the

conversations (summary, so as to not break confidentiality) so that some of the outcomes of discussion could be pushed to the wider USP staff. There were so many valuable things discussed that staff beyond the participants could benefit.

- Yes! I think that the peer discussion sessions were very valuable and let us talk about aspects of the work that we don't usually have time to talk with each other about. However, I do think that some topics could have been better handled by a professional moderator (such as discussions on making the workplace healthier). In future retreats, maybe there could be a mix of moderated and peer sessions?
- Yes! I thought the sessions were great because we had a variety of options, including ones that were not so serious. I think it's really helpful to have a retreat where people can relax and enjoy each other's company without too much pressure to work or contribute.
- Absolutely!
- I did. I attended the blogging session and was glad that communications staff participated. Even though these are billed as "peer" discussion groups, I think it is always valuable to have someone experienced in the topic help to facilitate the session.
- Yes. I enjoyed them and it was a great opportunity for people to self-organize and for people of various positional levels to elevate items of personal interest and expertise and share skills and perspectives with others.
- Yes, very interesting and informative. They were conducive to wide participation.
- Very. It was participatory learning.
- Yes and would "export" the model to other spaces (staff meetings, brown bag lunches, etc.)

Any other thoughts about the agenda?

- The wrap up movie with all the photos etc. was so clever and very cool. I can tell we have a lot of creative people at USP, but Michael Sosa should get the gold star for that fantastic way of closing the retreat .
- No.
- love the candy and stress balls
- The bingo game was a lot of fun. It's a good way to facilitate conversation and get people to talk. It was also nice to learn about colleagues hidden talents!
- The best agenda in the last 4 years was this year's agenda.
- I'm still not sure how much we can actually expect to accomplish - if the agenda was to be a more serious planning session, especially - in one day. I know that scheduling is ridiculously tough, however.
- Staff advisory committee did a good job. If this becomes something that we several times a year, people will think ahead of time of what they might offer to staff in retreats of this kind, adding to the breadth of the agenda. Staff should be aware that we do not have to be at a special point in US Programs' organizational/programmatic development to have a retreat -- rather, periodic retreats should be a regular vehicle we use for building our social and intellectual capital.
- Not really. It was a lot in a short period of time, but never felt like too much.

Please comment on logistical and agenda-related communication from the organizing team (Grantmaking Operations and the Staff Advisory Group) prior to the retreat. Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

- more use could be made of existing forums (USP staff meetings, SMT, fund/campaign meetings) to seek input or provide feedback. There seemed to be gaps of months when information wasn't flowing. Not a criticism though as the prolonged ED transition affected timing etc.
- none that I can think of now.
- no, I liked the idea that there was no homework.
- I think everything flowed pretty smoothly. That said, if I could make suggestions - it'd have been great if the submission time frame for proposing topics for peer led conversations were clearer, and if people had time in advance to sign up so that facilitators could have a better idea how many people they would be working with in conversation.
- I loved that staff got to weigh in on the agenda. I did feel a little off-kilter when the agenda changed in the few days before the retreat.
- The communications were swift and proper. Step by step the team did a great job!
- I think communication between Grantmaking Operations, the Staff Advisory Group and staff was tremendous. Our comments and suggestions were taken to the SAG, and we felt they were listened to and acted on. And there was a constant flow of good information and updates from Grantmaking Operations.
- No, all was great and I appreciate everyone's work.
- Good to end by 4:30 for the benefit of Baltimore staff. Should do this in advance as this is the second time we had to make a last minute change for this purpose. Generally, staff communications about the retreat were upbeat.
- No, it was well done.

Please comment on the retreat site (accommodations, food, meeting room, breaks, etc.). Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

- Like the retreat site. I would opt for fewer sugar/candy snacks and instead have healthier snacks (e.g. fruit trays).
- It's wonderful, really nice and the food is great. I felt VERY spoiled. That hotel is really nice! Maybe even a bit too much food (way more pizza than we needed and so many snacks during non-meal hours.)
- I thought the lunch had limited vegan options, but whatever they had was tasty.
- The site was great. it may have been better if there was more room for breakout sessions though
- Excellent!
- The accommodations were lovely! It was very convenient for Baltimore staff to stay in the same building as the retreat. The food was good and it was great to have coffee and snacks always available.
- The Tutu Center is a great retreat site. I appreciate having sunshine in the meeting room and the constant availability of snacks and drinks.

- The site is perfect except that it became too hot inside the main conference room and the temp was not properly adjusted...
- I stayed overnight at the conference center, which is very comfortable and the staff very attentive. But please bring back the omelette station!
- Fine space - and near Penn Station, too, for OSI-Baltimore convenience, but may be nice to change up the location one of these years, for variety's sake. Also, the Highline is right outside and as long as the weather is nice it might be nice to offer a short walk as a fresh air alternative.
- Site is fine -- convenient; and food is good.
- I didn't see the rooms, but it was very nice setting.

Anything else you would like to share?

- Bravo to the SAG team for a truly enjoyable retreat - the best yet!
- Incredible creativity and expertise in the room. An energizing end to a difficult year.
- I was struck by the fact that no one from CMBA was there and a few other people were missing. I wondered if it is possible to make the retreat a non-negotiable expectation once the date is set. OSI is very good to the staff. While there is a big workload, the benefits are extraordinary.
- A big Thank You! and Happy Holidays!
- truly the best OSF retreat ever. Cristina, Michael and the staff advisory team did an AWESOME job!!!
- THANK YOU to Cristina, Michael Sosa, Susan Allen and the entire SAG for working so hard to put the retreat together and doing such a great job! You guys rock!
- I'm so glad I got to see so many of my colleagues being creative and having fun!
- I really appreciate Grantmaking Operations and the SAG's diligence in planning and executing the retreat! I had the most fun at this year's retreat compared to retreats in the past.
- My sincere congratulations to all of you Cristina, Michael, Chrissie and Susan for putting together a fun, interactive, multi-level event. Seriously you all did a great job.
- Since many people seem to want to either lengthen the retreat or have more than one per year, perhaps we can have two a year. One would follow a format similar to this one, i.e. staff driven, and the other a more traditional with an outside facilitator, specified areas to be covered based on staff input.
- Big thanks!
- I've been reading a book by a physician who provides medical care to people with debilitating drug addictions in Vancouver, British Columbia. (No, I can't get enough.) His sense of stress (the kind that leads to drug use) is that it is triggered by "uncertainty, lack of information, ... loss of control ... conflict ... and isolation." At certain points in the year, that could describe OSF 2011. I thought the retreat was a very helpful intervention.