IRISE for KU:
INTEGRATING IRISE VALUES INTO KU CULTURE

2025 Staff Fellows

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KU

Contents

Executive Summary

Integrating the University of Kansas' IRISE values into the culture for Staff and Faculty

Objective: To embed the IRISE (Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Stewardship, Excellence) values into the University of Kansas' culture by incorporating these principles into all staff and faculty through targeted professional development and organizational practices.

Thesis: A review of values-based character education and ways it is encouraged through professional development on our campus with the goal of cementing IRISE values as an ingrained part of the culture of our campus.

Project Overview: The 2025 Staff Fellows cohort collaborated with the IRISE Fellows cohort to assess the current level of integration of IRISE values across the university. This project involved conducting a comprehensive review to identify research supporting the integration of values in higher education staff and faculty. The review aimed to uncover best practices and theoretical frameworks from values-based organizations both within and outside the university to inform recommendations for integrating and sustaining these values among university employees.

Key Findings

- *Literature Review*: Most existing research focuses on integrating values into higher education for students, with limited studies addressing the integration of values in staff and faculty.

- *Current Integration*: The current level of IRISE values integration among staff and faculty varies, indicating a need for more structured and consistent approaches.

- *Best Practices*: Successful values-based organizations emphasize continuous professional development, clear communication of values, and leadership commitment to fostering a values-driven culture.
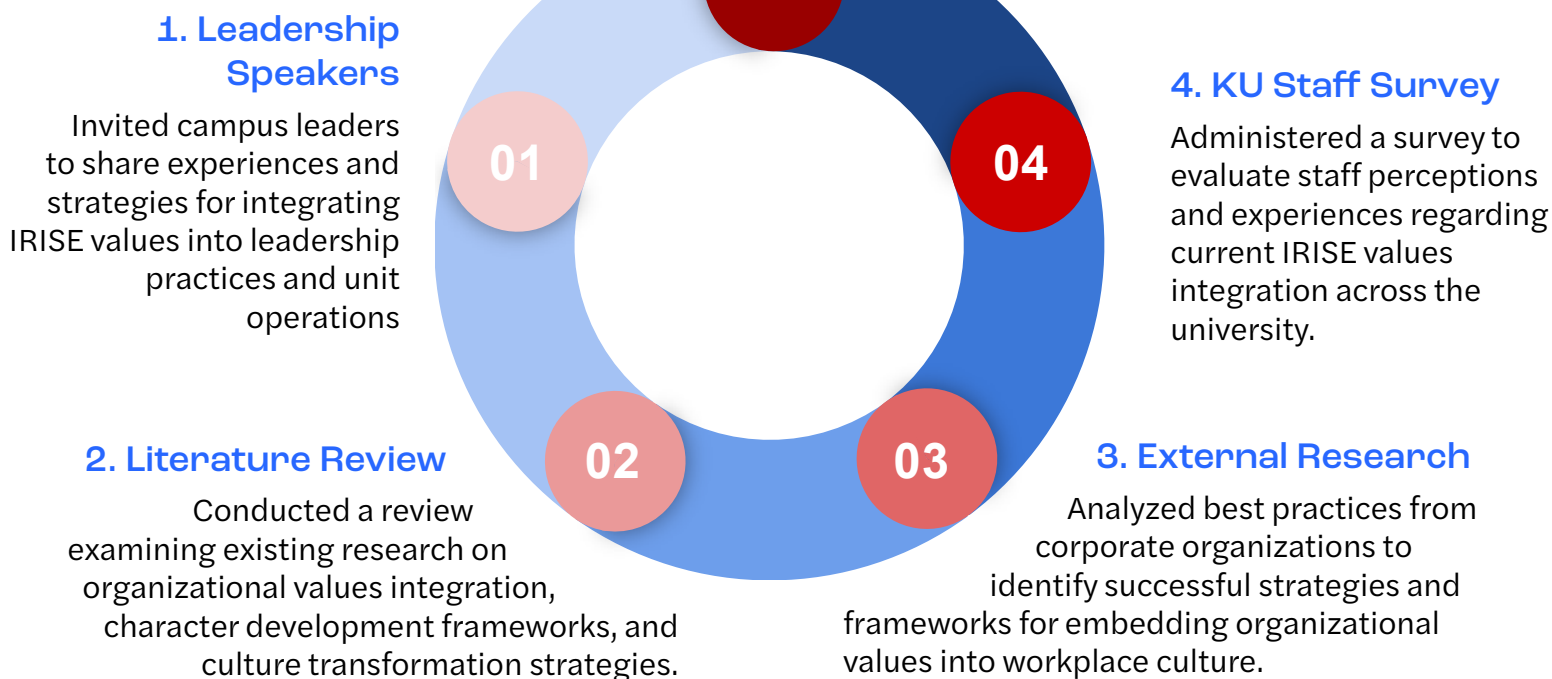
Recommendations

1. **Communication & Accountability**: Develop clear and consistent messaging around IRISE values through internal communications, including newsletters, meetings, and digital platforms. Encourage university leaders to actively promote, model, and recognize IRISE values in their daily interactions and decision-making processes.

2. **Recognition**: Establish a centralized platform for visibility and management of recognition opportunities. Annual ceremonies, newsletters, press releases, and spotlights should be employed to celebrate nominees.

3. **HR Integration**: Establish mechanisms for ongoing assessment and feedback to monitor the integration of IRISE values and make necessary adjustments.

4. **Professional Development Programs**: Implement regular training sessions and workshops focused on IRISE values to ensure staff and faculty understand and embody these principles.

Conclusion

Integrating the IRISE values into the fabric of the University of Kansas requires a concerted effort involving professional development, leadership engagement, and effective communication. By adopting best practices from values-based organizations, the university can create a cohesive and values-driven culture that enhances the overall work environment and aligns with its mission.

Process & Methodology

1. Leadership Speakers

Invited campus leaders to share experiences and strategies for integrating IRISE values into leadership practices and unit operations

2. Literature Review

Conducted a review examining existing research on organizational values integration, character development frameworks, and culture transformation strategies.

5. Focus Groups

Conducted four focus groups with KU staff to assess current implementation of IRISE values within their respective units and identify existing practices and barriers.

4. KU Staff Survey

Administered a survey to evaluate staff perceptions and experiences regarding current IRISE values integration across the university.

3. External Research

Analyzed best practices from corporate organizations to identify successful strategies and frameworks for embedding organizational values into workplace culture.

Discovery

The IRISE Culture Charter at the University of Kansas (KU) is a foundational framework designed to cultivate an exceptional learning community that uplifts every member and advances society. The acronym IRISE stands for Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Stewardship, and Excellence, which are the core values guiding interactions, decision-making, and institutional culture at KU. These principles foster a collaborative, inclusive, and transparent environment where students, faculty, and staff can thrive academically, professionally and personally. By embracing these values, KU aims to create a space that supports freedom of expression, academic inquiry, and continuous growth while ensuring a sense of belonging and mutual respect among all Jayhawks.

- *Integrity*: KU emphasizes honesty, transparency, and ethical behavior in all aspects of academic and professional life. This means being clear about roles and responsibilities, sharing knowledge and learning from each other, and engaging in collaborative and inclusive decision-making.

- *Respect*: The university recognizes the importance of different cultures, identities, abilities, and experiences. Respect at KU involves fostering a supportive environment where everyone feels valued and empowered to contribute.

- *Innovation*: KU encourages curiosity and creativity. Whether through research, education, or leadership, the university promotes forward-thinking approaches

that drive progress, enhance learning experiences, and make education widely accessible.

- ***Stewardship***: This principle reflects KU's commitment to serving the community through respectful engagement and collaboration. It involves continuous improvement through responsible management of resources, engaging with communities, and ensuring sustainable practices that benefit both university and society.

- ***Excellence***: KU strives for the highest standards in education, research, and service. Excellence is demonstrated through leadership, advocacy, and the pursuit of knowledge that has a meaningful impact on the world.

This discovery section will examine our research on character development in the workplace, highlighting key findings from existing literature and assessing the professional development and recognition opportunities currently offered at KU. It will then explore successful ethical, values-driven workplace cultures at leading companies demonstrating the critical role of a well-defined culture charter in fostering integrity and engagement within our institution. Finally, the discovery section will present the results of our internal assessments, including insights gathered from surveys and focus groups, providing a comprehensive understanding of our current environment and guiding future initiatives.

Review of Literature

Character education, ethics, and morality are essential for fostering a positive and productive workplace, shaping employees who are not only skilled but also responsible and empathetic. Harrison and Laco (2022) highlight the importance of cultivating character in remote work environments, emphasizing how digital technologies can maintain relational and character-building aspects traditionally found in education. They also suggest that university leadership should intentionally develop staff who contribute to the common good, focusing on moral, political, and civic virtues through dedicated offices, business ethics initiatives, and leadership courses.

Despite remote work challenges, leaders can strengthen human connections and character development by setting expectations, providing knowledge, and encouraging self-reflection. This fosters a participatory community where employees act as stewards of institutional values. Suresh and GangaLakshmi (2021) advocate for professional development programs that integrate empathy, compassion, and social responsibility, ensuring employees balance technical skills with human values.

Biesta (2010) argues for workplace environments where values take precedence over evidence-based practices, reinforcing the importance of normativity, power, and ethical standards in guiding professional actions. Schwartz (2022) underscores the significance of intellectual virtues—such as curiosity, open-mindedness, and perseverance—within higher education, promoting thoughtful and ethical engagement among students.

Newstead (2022) suggests that explicit virtues-based leadership can help professionals understand moral and ethical responsibilities more clearly, fostering integrity in leadership roles. Fitzgerald (2023) introduces a classical archetype-based approach to character development, emphasizing self-awareness, critical thinking, and motivation to cultivate socially responsible behavior.

The reviewed literature underscores the importance of character education, ethics, and morality in the workplace. These values

contribute to the development of responsible, empathetic, and ethical employees, fostering a positive and productive work environment. By integrating these principles into professional development and leadership practices, institutions can ensure that their staff not only excel in their roles but also contribute to a harmonious and ethical workplace.

Values-Based Opportunities at the University of Kansas

The University of Kansas provides a range of professional development opportunities aimed at fostering ethical leadership, communication, and integrity among staff. These programs already align with the university's IRISE values, ensuring that employees cultivate respect, stewardship, and excellence in their roles. From compassionate communication training that promotes empathy and understanding to supervisory programs that enhance leadership effectiveness, KU already strives to equip its staff with the tools to create a supportive and principled workplace. Additionally, specialized workshops on hiring best practices and feedback strategies reinforce ethical decision-making and constructive collaboration. By integrating character development into professional training, KU strengthens its commitment to a culture of integrity and continuous growth.

Compassionate Communication Series

The University of Kansas offers a compassionate communication series of training, developed by psychologist and mediator Marshall Rosenberg that is utilized globally. This series aims to foster understanding, teamwork, and ease in the workplace. Participants learn to hear difficult messages without taking them personally, better understand colleagues' perspectives, and listen in ways that avoid blame, fault, and hurtful labels. This approach promotes a respectful and empathetic work environment, aligning with the IRISE values of Integrity and Respect.

STEP (Supervisory Training for Excellence in Performance)

The STEP program, designed for KU staff supervisors, focuses on enhancing leadership skills and performance excellence. This training equips supervisors with the tools to effectively manage their teams, promote innovation, and uphold high standards of stewardship and excellence. By participating in STEP, supervisors are better prepared to lead with integrity and foster a culture of continuous improvement.

Best Practices in Conducting a Staff Search

KU provides training on Best Practices in Conducting a Staff Search, offering an overview of equal opportunity principles, university hiring guidelines, and best practices for interviewing. Attendance is encouraged for those planning to chair a search committee or anyone needing a refresher on conducting staff searches. The training also touches on student hourly hiring practices and changes. This training emphasizes integrity in recruitment, respect for all candidates, and stewardship in selecting individuals who will contribute positively to the university's mission.

Giving Feedback

KU offers training on Giving Feedback, which covers three types of feedback: appreciative, coaching, and evaluative. Participants learn one model of giving feedback and best practices for providing it. The training also provides tips to make feedback conversations a dialogue between two people rather than a monologue by the giver of feedback. This approach fosters a culture of respect and continuous improvement, aligning with the IRISE values.

Values Based Recognition Opportunities at KU

KU also offers various recognition opportunities that celebrate staff contributions and reinforce the university's commitment to integrity, respect, and excellence. Awards and acknowledgments highlight individuals who demonstrate leadership, collaboration, and dedication to KU's mission, fostering a culture of appreciation and motivation. Service awards honor long-term commitment, while leadership and innovation recognitions commend those who make meaningful contributions to workplace improvement. Additionally, peer-nominated accolades encourage a sense of community by allowing colleagues to recognize one another's achievements. By formally acknowledging outstanding efforts, KU reinforces the importance of character, professional growth, and institutional stewardship.

IRISE Recognition Program

The University of Kansas fosters a culture of appreciation and recognition through various awards that celebrate staff contributions and dedication to the university's values. The IRISE Recognition Program acknowledges KU community members who exemplify the IRISE values, with nominations collected via the IRISE culture charter website. Nominees receive words of appreciation from the provost and acknowledgement in the provost's newsletter. Some nominees were invited to join the IRISE Fellows program, strengthening campus community bonds and working toward further integration of IRISE across campus.

Jayhawk Thanks & Staff Recognition

This recognition opportunity offers a peer-driven approach, allowing staff to show appreciation through customizable templates to boost morale and reinforce positive workplace interactions. These recognitions can also be incorporated into performance evaluations, further validating staff contributions.

Dean's Staff Excellence Award

The top staff honor in the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences awards $4,000 to an outstanding staff member who embodies IRISE values and has demonstrated dedicated years of service within higher education and the College of Liberal Arts & Sciences. The Dean's office solicits nominations annually to identify staff who give their time and experience and build and maintain collaborative relationships within the College and across other schools and units demonstrating continuous effort towards the University of Kansas' mission. Through these programs, KU ensures that employees feel valued and supported in their professional growth.

External Research

Without a clearly defined code of ethical conduct, companies and institutions risk falling into patterns of decision-making that prioritize short-term gains over long-term integrity. A lack of ethical guidelines can lead to corruption, exploitation, and unfair treatment of employees, customers, or stakeholders, eroding trust and damaging reputations. Inconsistent or unethical practices may result in legal consequences, financial loss, and diminished credibility, making it difficult to attract talent, secure partnerships, or maintain public support. Organizations that do not prioritize ethical accountability struggle to foster a culture of transparency and fairness, which ultimately impairs innovation, productivity, and sustainability. Having a strong ethical framework not only mitigates risks but also ensures that an institution's values align with societal expectations, reinforcing responsibility and long-term success. By contrast, companies with an ethical code of conduct guiding their business decisions are rewarded with consumer trust and longevity.

As an institution of higher learning, we not only help students discover themselves and their purpose, but we also aim to build healthy communities and make discoveries that change the world (The University of Kansas, 2025). To carry out this mission, we strive to serve as an exceptional learning community that lifts each member and advances society (The University of Kansas, 2025). This mission could be accomplished by strategically implementing our IRISE values mixed with various career competency behaviors in our daily work as staff members.

Our IRISE values include *integrity, respect, innovation, stewardship, and excellence*. The National Association of College & Employers (NACE) defines career competencies as behaviors that can assist in individual and team success in the workplace (NACE, 2024). These competencies are *communication, leadership, professionalism, teamwork, technology, career & self-development, critical thinking, and equity & inclusion*. Below are examples from corporate companies on their values and company mission. The values that each company shares with the IRISE values are explained, along with the career competency behaviors associated with those values and some of the specific beliefs and behaviors from each company.

Johnson & Johnson

Johnson & Johnson's credo is simple and was crafted by a member of the company's founding family in 1943. This was long before anyone ever heard the term "corporate social responsibility." Put simply, their Credo challenges them to put the needs and well-being of the people they serve first. In 1982, Johnson & Johnson faced a crisis when several people died after taking Tylenol capsules laced with cyanide. The company's response to this tragedy is often cited as a model of corporate integrity, respect, and stewardship.

Johnson & Johnson chairman, James Burke, reacted to the negative media coverage by forming a seven-member strategy team. The team's strategy guidance from Burke was first, "How do we protect the people?" and second "How do we save this product?" Along with stopping the production and advertising of Tylenol, Johnson and Johnson withdrew all Tylenol capsules from store shelves in Chicago and the surrounding area. After finding two more contaminated Tylenol bottles, the company realized the potential danger of the product and ordered a national recall of every capsule, costing the company over $100 million. Even though there was little chance of discovering more cyanide laced tablets,

Johnson & Johnson showed that they were not willing to take a risk with the public's safety, even if it cost the company millions of dollars. The result of the company's swift and ethical actions was the public perception of Tylenol as the unfortunate victim of a malicious crime.

- **Integrity**: Johnson & Johnson acted swiftly and transparently. Despite the significant financial loss, they issued a mass recall of 31 million bottles of Tylenol. This decision was made to ensure public safety, demonstrating their commitment to doing the right thing even at great cost.

- **Respect**: The company showed profound respect for the affected families and the broader public by prioritizing their safety over profits. They spent more than $100 million. They communicated openly with the media and the public, providing updates and warnings about the dangers of the contaminated Tylenol. This respectful approach helped maintain public trust during a very challenging time.

- **Stewardship**: Johnson & Johnson took proactive steps to prevent future incidents. They developed industry-leading tamper-evident packaging, which set new standards for product safety. This innovation not only protected consumers but also demonstrated the company's commitment to stewardship by leading the way in improving industry practices.

Overall, Johnson & Johnson's handling of the Tylenol crisis in 1982 exemplifies how a company can uphold its values in the face of adversity.

Garmin

The foundation of Garmin's culture is honesty, integrity, and respect for associates, customers, and business partners (Garmin, 2025). Each Garmin associate is fully committed to serving customers and fellow associates through outstanding performance (Garmin, 2025). Integrity and respect are values shared by both Garmin and KU. Also, stewardship and excellence are IRISE values similarly shared with Garmin, in terms of being committed to serving customers through outstanding performance. This mirrors our IRISE value of stewardship by engaging regularly and respectfully with the communities and constituents we serve. Below are beliefs and behaviors Garmin seeks to implement across their teams that mirror our IRISE values for individual and team success.

- We believe in appreciating differences and celebrating shared qualities we share.

- Collaboration does not mean just building great products — it is also about making connections.

- We acknowledge the different experiences of our associates and seek to challenge conventional thinking, understand different perspectives, and overcome bias.

- We think every day is an opportunity to innovate, and a chance to beat yesterday.

- Start your career at a place where new ideas are welcome and everyone's opinion matters.

Below are sample behaviors associated with Garmin's values of integrity and respect that can help individual staff members and teams achieve success.

- **Integrity**: Be accountable for individual and team responsibilities and deliverables. Solicit and use feedback from multiple cultural perspectives to make inclusive and equity-minded decisions.

- **Respect**: Frame communication with respect to diversity of learning styles,

varied individual communication abilities, and cultural differences. Listen carefully to others and take time to understand and ask appropriate questions without interrupting.

HNTB Corporation

The philosophy for the HNTB Corporation is that we are stronger as a team than we are as individuals (HNTB, 2025). HNTB encourages their employees to bring their whole and authentic selves to work, to help create a meaningful welcoming environment where they are valued, celebrated, and respected (HNTB, 2023). Some behaviors to achieve their mission include taking personal responsibility for making success happen, expecting more of themselves in everything they do, building relationships, and collaborating.

Other traits and behaviors that define their culture include integrity, technical excellence, respect for others, continual development of all employees, and commitment to their profession (HNTB). IRISE values such as integrity, respect, and excellence also mirror some of the values from HNTB. Sample behaviors and beliefs associated with HNTB similar to KU IRISE values:

- *Integrity*: Gather and analyze information from a diverse set of sources and individuals to fully understand a problem. Seek out and leverage diverse resources and feedback from others to inform direction.

- *Respect*: Respect others and build relationships. Demonstrate flexibility by adapting to diverse environments.

- *Excellence*: Employ personal strengths, knowledge, and talents to complement those of others. Show a high level of dedication toward doing a good job.

Hewlett Packard

HP is a technology company that believes companies should do more than just make a profit; they should make the world a better place. Just like our institution, HP utilizes innovation to drive contributions to humanity (HP, 2025). They also believe thoughtful ideas can come from anyone, anywhere, at any time. HP seeks to reinvent what is possible (HP, 2023). HP is committed to taking on tough challenges, disrupting the status quo, and creating what is next (HP, 2023). No matter who you are or where you sit, HP believes in collaboration and creating connections with all colleagues in the organization (HP, 2023). HP believes collaboration is more than a way of working —it is an opportunity to explore diverse points of view and bring out the best in each other (HP, 2023). Sample behaviors and beliefs associated with HP similar to KU IRISE values:

- *Innovation*: We want employees to reimagine and reinvent what is possible.

- *Stewardship*: Identify areas for continual growth while pursuing and applying feedback for institutional growth.

- *Stewardship*: HP Sustainable Impact is our commitment to creating positive, lasting change for the planet, its people, and our communities.

H&R Block

H&R Block's core values are centered around integrity, client commitment, innovation, community involvement, and diversity and inclusion. These principles guide the company's operations and interactions with all stakeholders. These core values are integral to H&R Block's mission. H&R Block implemented its core values across the organization through a comprehensive strategy that integrated all core values. These core values

were operationalized through some of their initiatives including:

- Belonging@Block which fosters a culture where every associate feels heard, included, and inspired. It includes associate-led groups supporting various affinity groups.

- Make Every Block Better is a community impact program that aims to create vibrant neighborhoods in underserved urban areas and generate opportunities for business owners of color to thrive.

- Hackathons and Innovation Events where teams collaborate to solve challenges, promoting innovation and creative problem-solving.

Through these and other initiatives, H&R Block demonstrates a commitment to embedding its core values into the fabric of its operations, ensuring a positive impact on all stakeholders. Each department actively implements the company's core values through tailored initiatives that align with their specific functions.

H&R Block actively provides training and resources to its employees to reinforce its core values. These initiatives are integrated into various aspects of employee experience, from onboarding to ongoing professional development. H&R Block establishes a foundational experience that sets the stage for understanding and embracing the company's core values. They have an immersive onboarding program that introduces them to H&R Block's industry, business operations, and strategic goals. H&R Block offers career pathing, coaching, and development programs to support employees' growth. H&R Block focuses on initiative designed to align personal career goals with the organization's values, fostering a culture of continuous learning and ethical practice.

H&R Block takeaways after implementation of their core values

- Increased trust and repeat business.

- Focus on innovation helped them compete with rising digital first companies.

- Elevation of brand's public image earning them goodwill and social capital.

- Their values helped guide tough decisions during unpredictable times and served as a compass, enabling stronger, more unified leadership responses.

Helzberg Diamonds

Helzberg Diamonds' core values are centered around integrity, customer service, and a strong team-oriented culture. Their guiding principles are integrity and trust, customer service focus, teamwork, continuous improvement and caring culture. These values are reflected in their products, employee relationships and in their long-standing reputation.

Helzberg Diamonds integrates its core values throughout the organization by embedding them into daily operations, employee engagement, customer interactions, and community involvement. These core values are operationalized through some of their initiatives including:

- Fostering a motivated workforce where employees are encouraged to approach their roles with enthusiasm and energy.

- Helzberg Helps is a nonprofit organization that engages in philanthropic efforts where employees volunteer to raise funds for various charities.

- Embracing technological advancements to enhance customer experience and operational efficiency.

Helzberg Diamonds strives to create a culture that not only delivers exceptional jewelry and service but also contributes positively to society and fosters a supportive work environment.

Each department plays a role in building and reinforcing a value-driven culture. Employees are trained to prioritize honesty and transparency in every interaction. Teams cultivate a supportive environment emphasizing teamwork and recognition. Each department adapts the company's values to its specific functions ensuring the core values are lived out daily.

Helzberg Diamonds actively promotes its core values through comprehensive training and resources designed to embed these principles into every aspect of employee experience. Helzberg commits to ongoing education, starting with immediate onboarding and continuing throughout an employee's career. This approach ensures that employees consistently align with the company's values and service standards.

Helzberg Diamonds' leadership aligns their core values through intentional actions, especially during times of challenge and change. During organizational changes or external disruptions, leadership emphasizes honest and respectful communication with associates. Executives and managers share updates openly and involve team leaders in decision-making to build trust and reduce uncertainty. They ensure consistency between their core values and their response to adversity.

Helzberg Diamonds takeaways after implementation of their core values

- Fostered a positive and welcoming environment across all levels of the organization.

- Reinforced the importance of the core values in daily operations.

- Increased efforts giving back to the community.

- Improved efficiency and responsiveness.

- Created an environment where associates feel supported and valued.

JE Dunn Construction

JE Dunn Construction's core values are the foundation of their culture and decision-making. The company is known for emphasizing people, integrity, collaboration, vision, and excellence. JE Dunn integrates its core values through comprehensive strategies that permeate every facet of the organization. Each department builds and reinforces culture by tailoring the company's core values into their daily operations and team dynamics. Teams lead by example. Each department emphasizes open dialogue and personal accountability.

JE Dunn provides comprehensive training and resources to instill and reinforce its core values across the organization. Through structured programs and resources, JE Dunn ensures that its core values are not only communicated but also actively practiced throughout the organization. Leadership consistently demonstrates alignment with the company's core values especially during times of challenge and change. In times of economic uncertainty or industry-wide challenges, JE Dunn leadership has emphasized ethical communication and strategic transparency with stakeholders. The company adopted tech solutions to remain competitive.

JE Dunn takeaways after implementation of their core value

- Stronger culture.

- Better morale.

- More inclusive and loyal workforce.

- Higher retention rates and a more collaborative, energized company culture.

- Ability to stay ahead of industry shifts.

- Increased community engagement and transparent communication.

- Strengthened relationships with stakeholders.

- Clearer foundation for decision making during disruptions.

- Ability to stay adaptable, stable, and aligned under pressure protecting all stakeholders.
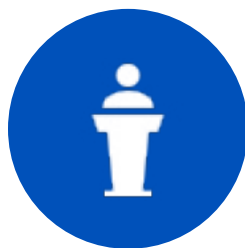
Lessons for KU Implementation

Values must be operationalized through specific programs.

Departmental customization increases relevance and adoption.

Comprehensive training necessary at all organizational levels.

Leadership consistency crucial for credibility.

Measurable outcomes demonstrate value of values integration.

Values provide stability and guidance during uncertainty.

Internal Research

To assess the integration of IRISE values across the University of Kansas, our team conducted a comprehensive study combining survey data and focus group discussions. In March 2025, a university-wide staff survey gathered insights on awareness, implementation, and experiences with the IRISE Culture Charter, while focus groups provided deeper qualitative perspectives from key administrative and academic support units. Through this mixed-methods approach, we identified significant gaps in familiarity and application of IRISE values, as well as areas where staff see opportunities for cultural growth. The findings, framed through the five core IRISE values—Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Stewardship, and Excellence—highlight both strengths and challenges in fostering an ethical and engaged workplace at KU.

Methodology

UPS/USS Staff Survey

In March 2025, our team implemented a comprehensive survey to assess the current integration of IRISE values across KU. The survey was distributed electronically to 3,961 staff members, collecting 575 responses yielding a 15% response rate across various departments and units. The survey included both quantitative Likert-scale items and open-ended qualitative questions (Appendix A). The survey aimed to gather insights regarding awareness, understanding, implementation, and experience with IRISE values in daily work environments.

Focus Groups

In addition to the survey, four focus groups were conducted with staff from key administrative and academic support units: Libraries, KU International Affairs (KUIA), Operations, and the Finance Shared Service Center (SSC). These groups were identified as exemplars in the survey or identified as key discussants of workplace community culture during Staff Fellow discussions. Each session lasted approximately 60 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview protocol developed by the Staff Fellows cohort. Questions explored unit culture, alignment with IRISE values, community-building practices, leadership modeling, and perceived barriers to implementation (Appendix B). Notes were taken during each session and analyzed thematically to identify cross-cutting insights and unit-specific nuances. All responses have been anonymized to protect participant confidentiality.

Overall Findings

Our internal analysis revealed significant awareness gaps across campus regarding IRISE implementation. As shown in Figure 1, most respondents (57%) reported being "not familiar at all" or only "slightly familiar" with the IRISE Culture Charter, with only 12% considering themselves "very" or "extremely" familiar.

The following themes emerged consistently across the survey and focus group data. They are framed through the five IRISE values as well as more practical themes.

IRISE Values

Integrity

Across units, integrity was most often associated with transparency, accountability, and psychological safety. Staff emphasized the importance of being able to make mistakes without fear of retribution, and of leaders who model ethical behavior and open communication. However, survey responses indicated that only 18% of respondents fully agreed that university leadership consistently integrates IRISE values into decision-
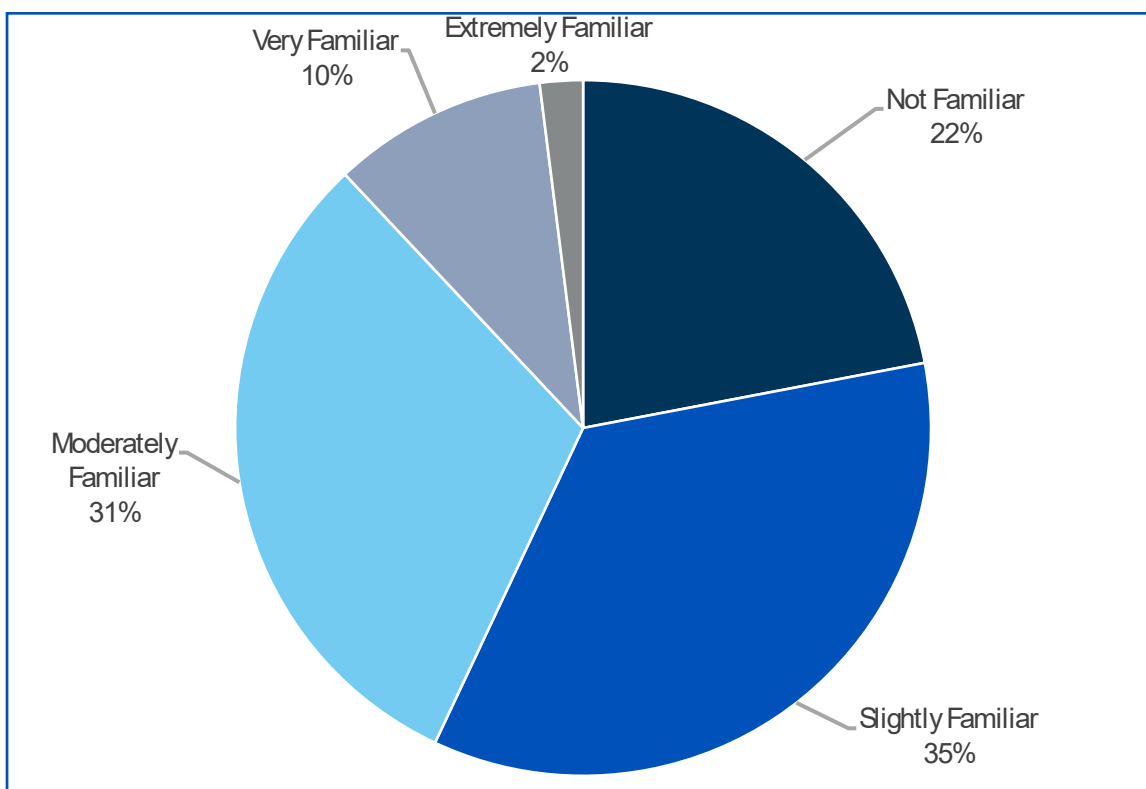
Fig. 1 Survey Results for the question "How familiar are you with KU's IRISE Culture Charter.

making, (fig. 2) suggesting a gap between aspirational values and perceived practice.

Focus group participants noted that siloed communication, lack of clarity in decision-making, and inconsistent follow-through from leadership undermine trust. Several participants expressed concern that initiatives like IRISE are not always accompanied by visible or lasting change, leading to skepticism about institutional commitment. This was countered by a number of empathic comments indicating that participants would like to see the IRISE Culture Charter continue and be more strongly embraced around the university.

Respect

Respect emerged as the most frequently cited and deeply felt value across all data sources. In the survey, 21% of respondents agreed that the university culture values their well-being, while 33% somewhat agreed. Focus group participants described respect as foundational to their unit cultures, particularly in environments where hierarchical differences (e.g., between faculty and staff) are acknowledged and actively mitigated.

Participants emphasized the importance of inclusive communication, recognition of diverse contributions, and equitable treatment. However, many also noted that respect is not consistently modeled across the university, particularly in interactions between academic and administrative units and between faculty and staff, even within the same unit.

Innovation

Innovation was described as both essential and under-supported. While some units (e.g., SSC and KUIA) highlighted examples of innovative practices—such as redesigned training programs, flexible work arrangements, and cross-unit collaborations, others noted that resource constraints, risk aversion, and bureaucratic hurdles often stifle creativity.

Focus group participants expressed a desire for more structured support for experimentation, including time, funding, and leadership encouragement.

Stewardship

Stewardship was most often associated with responsible resource management, community care, and long-term thinking. Participants described efforts to support students, maintain campus infrastructure, and build inclusive environments as acts of stewardship. However, they also noted that budget cuts, staffing shortages, and increased workloads have made it difficult to sustain these efforts.

In the survey, only 17% of respondents agreed that their unit incorporates the IRISE Culture Charter and requests feedback on community culture. Focus group participants called for dedicated funding for community-building, especially in units without access to endowment or discretionary funds.

Excellence

Excellence was framed not as perfection, but as continuous improvement and shared accountability. Participants described striving for high standards in service delivery, student support, and internal operations. However, several noted that a culture of perfectionism, particularly in high-performing units, can inhibit collaboration and well-being.

Survey responses reflected this tension: while 37% agreed that the university's values align with its mission, only 13% agreed that leadership actions reflect those values during times of challenge or change. Focus group participants emphasized the need for more visible recognition of staff contributions, especially for those in non-leadership roles.
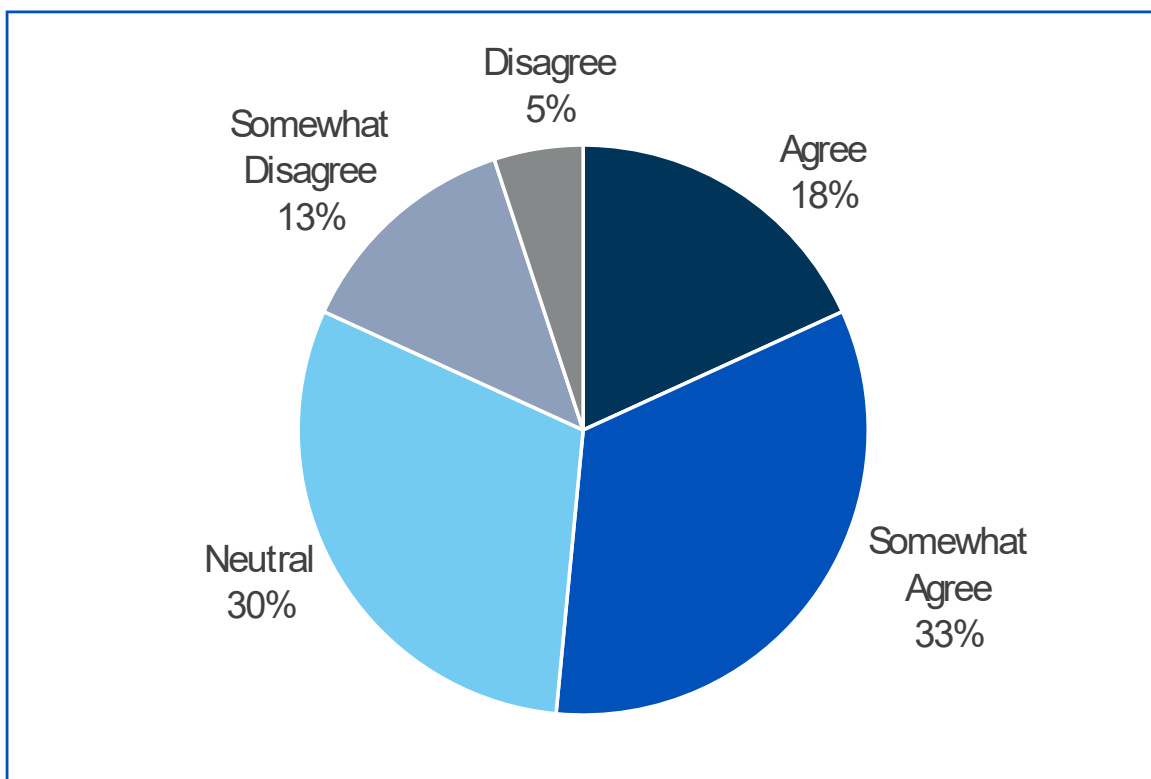

Fig. 2 Survey Results for the question "The university's values/ virtues are integrated into leadership's decision-making process."
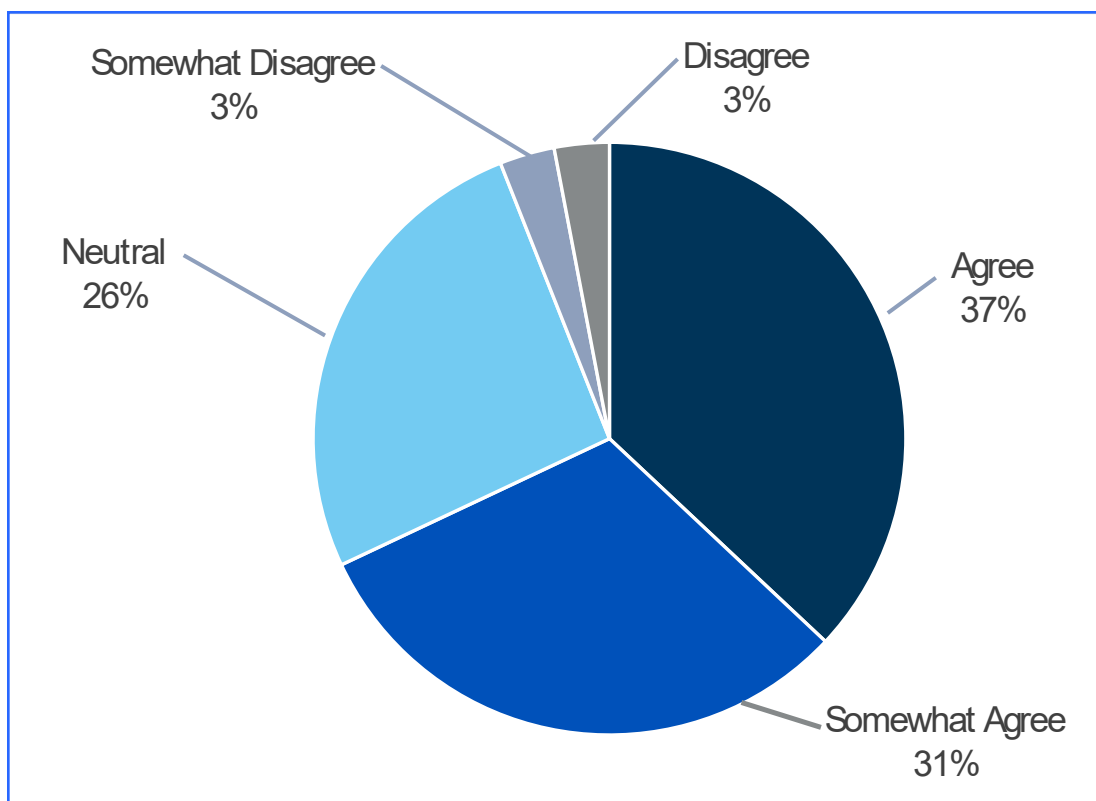
Fig. 3 Survey Results for the question "The University's core values align with its mission and goals?"

Findings Reframed

Workplace Culture and Climate
Across all focus groups, participants described their unit cultures as generally supportive, collaborative, and mission driven. However, this was often contrasted with perceptions of the broader university culture, which was described as siloed, hierarchical, and inconsistent in modeling inclusive values. Staff frequently cited a disconnect between unit-level efforts to build community and a lack of visible support or modeling from senior leadership.

Leadership and Communication
Participants emphasized the importance of transparent, consistent, and values-driven leadership. While some units reported strong internal leadership practices, there was a widespread perception that university-wide communication lacks clarity and consistency. Staff expressed a desire for leaders to more explicitly connect decisions to shared values and to communicate more openly about institutional priorities and constraints.

Recognition and Morale
Recognition of staff contributions was a recurring theme. Many participants noted that informal appreciation within teams was common, but formal recognition, especially tied to institutional values, was lacking. 41% of survey respondents said their unit acknowledges staff whose work aligns with shared values; 59% said it does not. In focus groups, staff called for more visible, consistent, and meaningful recognition practices, including public acknowledgment, tangible rewards, and integration into existing HR processes.

Collaboration and Connection

Participants across units expressed a strong desire for more cross-campus collaboration and opportunities to connect with colleagues outside their immediate teams. The lack of informal gathering spaces and structured interdepartmental engagement was seen as a barrier to building a cohesive university culture. Suggestions included more in-person events, shared professional development opportunities, and clearer pathways for inter-departmental partnerships.

Respondents also discussed the need for more campus spaces to participate in informal collaboration. References to former gathering spots on or near campus, such as McLain's Café, Impromptu Café, and the coffee carts that were once found in Watson, Strong, JRP, and other spaces arose in multiple focus groups. Participants mentioned that the computerized interfaces in the existing coffee shops make the spaces feel unwelcome.

When prompted to reflect on experiences with the Alumni Association's "Thank Goodness Its Thursday" or the "Rapport Program" through the Office of Civil Rights & Title IX, participants who had attended these programs emphatically agreed that they help build community and are useful. However, several employees stated that it was unclear to them if these activities or those provided by Employee Wellness were considered work time or not. One participant mentioned that a centralized policy they could give to their supervisor about participation in these events would be helpful.

Professional Development and Accountability

There was broad support for integrating shared values into new employee orientation, professional development, and performance evaluation. Participants emphasized that supervisors and leaders should be held accountable for modeling and reinforcing cultural expectations. Respondents recommended incorporating values into annual evaluations in place of or in conjunction with the core competencies. It was also recommended that the Culture Charter be implemented into existing training courses, such as the STEP training for supervisors. In focus groups, staff suggested embedding community culture expectations into onboarding, supervisor training, and leadership development programs, with clear accountability mechanisms.

Resource Constraints and Burnout

A consistent theme across all data sources was the impact of limited resources on staff morale, innovation, and community-building. Budget cuts, staffing shortages, and increased workloads were cited as major barriers to implementing community-building initiatives. In one focus group, a director mentioned that he had no funding available for community-building and recognition efforts as they rely solely on state funds or campus fees.

IRISE Values in Action: Finance Shared Service Center

Among all four focus groups conducted, the Finance Shared Service Center (SSC) emerged as the most compelling exemplary of IRISE values integration. The SSC has distinguished itself through comprehensive, intentional implementation of all five values, creating a demonstrably positive culture for staff despite university structural challenges. Despite being a fully remote unit that recently consolidated previously separate departments of the unit, successfully cultivating a collaborative and supportive environment that embodies the IRISE framework while adapting it to their specific context.

SSC leadership has deliberately focused on building a positive work culture over the past two years, recognizing that their 100% remote status required intentional community-building efforts. Their approach demonstrates how IRISE values can be effectively integrated even in virtual work environments, offering valuable insights for other units facing similar challenges. The tangible results of their efforts include improved retention, better workload management, and a community environment characterized by staff members as "the best I've ever seen."

Innovative Practices

The SSC has prioritized innovation, developing multiple strategies to foster connection and collaboration in a remote environment. They established open office hours three times weekly, creating virtual spaces where staff can "pop in and out" to discuss work matters, seek peer assistance, or simply engage with colleagues outside structured meetings. This approach has proven effective in fostering a supportive environment across different teams while providing opportunities for staff to meet colleagues they might not otherwise interact with.

The unit has also redesigned their training and onboarding processes, implementing comprehensive experiences for new employees that includes mentorship and regular check-ins. This structured approach helps new staff understand their role within the broader university context while providing ongoing support.

Additionally, SSC leadership has focused on streamlining processes, ensuring resources are up-to-date, and leveraging technology to spread information efficiently. They've also innovated their hiring practices, approaching recruitment as the beginning of a "long-term relationship" rather than simply filling positions.

Cultural Integration

SSC has implemented numerous initiatives to build community despite geographical separation. Notably, the planning committee for these events includes remote representatives specifically tasked with ensuring virtual participants feel fully included. These include:

- "Coffee and Conversation" events monthly

- "Chat and Chill" gatherings on the last Thursday of each month

- Popcorn viewing parties where they watch a show virtually and connect every other month

- In-person, informal coffee chats at McLain's Bakery the last Monday of the month where leadership pays and uses this opportunity to connect with colleagues that usually only meet virtually.

- "Happy Fiscal New Year," a new annual celebration that will start in July. This event will combine relationship-building with technical training and strategic planning.

The unit has also conducted outreach to external departments they support, organizing

field trips to tour various KU facilities and connecting faces with names, fostering deeper relationships with campus partners.

Alignment with IRISE

While developing their own mission, vision, and values (encapsulated in their "#WELIFT" acronym), SSC leadership deliberately maintained alignment with the IRISE framework while adapting it to their specific context. This demonstrates how units can authentically embody institutional values while customizing implementation to their unique environment and needs.

The unit particularly emphasizes stewardship, recognizing their responsibility to help other departments navigate complex financial processes despite limited resources and budgets. They are actively partnering with campus leaders to develop training programs designed to build financial literacy across the university, positioning others to accomplish their objectives more effectively and foster a broader sense of institutional responsibility.

SSC leadership also prioritizes integrity, creating an environment where "staff have freedom to make mistakes, take ownership of work, and learn." This approach directly aligns with the psychological safety component of integrity identified in our broader findings. Interestingly, SSC leadership expressed reservations about the term "excellence" within the IRISE framework, noting that it connotes perfection rather than continuous improvement. Instead, they prefer to emphasize the importance of striving to do one's best while acknowledging that mistakes are valuable learning opportunities, a perspective that enriches our understanding of how "excellence" might be more effectively framed across the institution.

Challenges and Insights

Despite their internal success, SSC staff identified significant challenges when interacting with the broader university culture. They described the university as "siloed" and noted that their staff often engage with campus partners "at their worst moments" because often their communicating with people from external units that don't understand the processes which creates difficult dynamics. Staff expressed frustration at being positioned as "the middleman" when communicating policy changes they didn't implement, observing that attitudes can shift from collaborative to adversarial when other units feel excluded from decision-making.

SSC leadership offered valuable insights regarding institutional change efforts, noting that "we do a lot of initiatives without the change of culture" and stating the daily experiences don't change despite new initiatives. They raised important questions about leadership capacity, appropriate staffing, and necessary resources to support cultural transformation, observing that "culture is how you feel, and no one is measuring that."

Recommendations

To strengthen the integration of IRISE values—Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Stewardship, and Excellence—into KU culture, a strategic, multi-dimensional approach is recommended. Based on extensive research, surveys, and focus group input, the proposed plan focuses on four core areas: Communication & Accountability, Visibility, Recognition, and HR Integration. Key strategies include improving internal communication and accountability mechanisms, increasing the visibility of IRISE values across campus, expanding opportunities to recognize individuals who exemplify these values, embedding IRISE into human resources practices, and promoting professional development aligned with these principles. Together, these efforts aim to embed IRISE more deeply into KU's organizational fabric.

Communication & Accountability

The foundation of successfully embedding IRISE values within KU's culture begins with clear, consistent communication and meaningful accountability measures. Our research indicates that many staff members are uncertain about how to define and apply these values in their daily work. Therefore, we recommend providing brief, explicit definitions for each value that translate abstract concepts into actionable behaviors. These definitions should be the headline of the culture charter website, as well as included in any marketing and promotion materials distributed across the campus. Clear, concise definitions will equip leadership with cohesive talking points to ensure messaging about IRISE values remains consistent across all university communications. The survey results strongly suggest that staff want to see IRISE keywords incorporated into communications about university policies and initiatives, reinforcing their importance in decision-making processes.

A critical finding from our focus groups revealed that while leadership might be doing excellent work fostering community culture, these efforts need to be explicitly connected to IRISE values. The provost's five-year plan/vision related to community culture must be communicated more prominently and repeatedly. As one participant noted, "Leadership, both senior administration and unit level leadership, needs to be more overtly and outspokenly committed to community and community values."

To ensure accountability, we recommend fully integrating IRISE into the Jayhawks Rising strategic planning process requiring leaders to report on IRISE implementation in their annual reports. An example of a leader implementing the IRISE values would be including a designated IRISE slide in their presentations for their units and staff. This formal integration would elevate IRISE from an aspirational framework to an operational priority with measurable outcomes.

Visibility

Visibility is another crucial component of successful implementation. We recommend a multi-channel approach that includes physical elements (table tents, banners, campus events, branded items), digital reinforcement (wallpapers, screen savers, presentation bylines), and personal identification (email signature lines, visual symbols for each value). Targeted campaigns such as "IRISE For... KU's workforce, KU Well-being" and the "What do you RISE for?" tagline would further personalize the values. A regular IRISE newsletter would share success stories and ongoing initiatives, while a dedicated IRISE.ku.edu website would serve as a central hub for all related resources.

Further, we suggest building a dedicated IRISE website, beyond what is currently available through the culture charter page of the

Provost's website. This will show that IRISE is a priority and streamline how people can find more information about these values. It would also serve as a hub for recognition opportunities, trainings, and suggestions for faculty and staff can implement IRISE into their work. Marketing and promotion efforts directing people to a standalone website like IRISE.ku.edu is simple, succinct, and will increase the likelihood that people will engage with the content.

Recognition

Recognition is essential for reinforcing desired behaviors and embedding values within an organization's culture. Our research indicates that while KU has various recognition programs, they are fragmented and inconsistently tied to IRISE values. We recommend allocating resources for an Appreciation and Recognition function, either as an office, department, or dedicated position, to coordinate all recognition efforts. This centralized approach would create a repository of all recognition opportunities for easier access, management, and nominations. Positioning this function within HR would provide institutional support and ensure alignment with employee development initiatives.

To enhance the impact of IRISE recognition, we recommend increasing visibility for nominees through annual ceremonies, newsletter features, or press releases. Spotlight interviews would share their stories with the broader community, creating powerful examples of values in action. Tangible rewards such as "challenge coins" or lapel pins designating "IRISE Exemplars" would provide lasting acknowledgment of contributions. Importantly, we also recommend acknowledging the supervisors of the nominees, as they play a critical role in creating environments where IRISE values can flourish.

The current nomination process could be improved by making the nomination link to a more prominent location near the top of the IRISE Culture Charter webpage and including it prominently in all Provost, Chancellor, and KU Today emails. IRISE values should be embedded into existing recognition criteria across all university awards to create consistency and reinforce their importance. We recommend simplifying the nomination format to acknowledge individuals and the specific value they exemplify, similar to the Jayhawk Thanks program.

Internal feedback revealed that the nomination process itself can be a barrier to recognition. We recommend implementing a two-stage process where the committee investigates nominations after initial submission, reducing the burden on nominators. It was suggested the committee receive the nomination and then investigate the nomination, taking the onus off the process to nominate, then the committee can request more details later if needed.

Community participation is crucial for widespread adoption of IRISE values. We recommend focusing on achieving buy-in from all university constituencies through activities such as a Day of IRISE Service for professional development. Leadership should be regularly encouraged to discuss IRISE implementation at retreats and meetings. Dedicating one TGIT event per semester to IRISE values would further integrate these principles into existing community gatherings.

HR Integration

Our guiding principle for implementation is "Don't create, integrate!" Rather than developing parallel systems, we recommend embedding IRISE values within existing HR frameworks and processes. Survey results strongly indicate support for incorporating

IRISE into the Core Competencies framework used for employee evaluation. Several respondents suggested including or replacing existing criteria with IRISE values in annual evaluations.

To further encourage service to both the KU campus and the broader Lawrence/Kansas City community, employee evaluations could include recognition for participation in impactful activities such as Move-In Day, The Big Event, Jayhawks Give a Flock, and other local philanthropic organizations. Incorporating these contributions into performance reviews would highlight their value and promote a culture of engagement. Additionally, establishing a Day of IRISE Service would serve as both a professional development opportunity and a visible demonstration of KU's commitment to the IRISE values, reinforcing the university's dedication to community involvement and character-driven leadership.

Professional development presents numerous opportunities for integration. The STEP training program required for supervisors, could be enhanced with IRISE values sessions, particularly within the "Ethics in the workplace" section. While currently mandatory only upon promotion to supervisory roles, we recommend requiring (currently it is optional) STEP refresher training every five years to ensure ongoing alignment with institutional values. In addition, professional development funding applications should include questions about how IRISE values will be incorporated into proposed activities.

Our focus groups emphasized the critical role of supervisors in creating a culture of appreciation and recognition. As one participant noted, "Supervisors should be creating (a) culture of constant small thanks and recognition. Supervisors should be accountable for nurturing culture as part of their responsibilities." This accountability should be explicitly included in supervisory expectations. Supervisory roles should require ongoing IRISE training every five years.

We identified numerous existing programs where IRISE values language could be integrated, including the Compassionate Communication series, Aspiring Leaders program, and Orientation/Welcome trainings. Creating a dedicated "IRISE module" in the myTalent learning platform would provide a central resource, while encouraging integration of IRISE values into all staff senate committees and action teams would extend influence across governance structures.

Finally, to address situational needs, we recommend developing assignable IRISE training modules that supervisors can deploy through the myTalent system as needed. This would allow for targeted interventions when specific values need reinforcement within teams or departments.

Conclusion

In summary, these recommendations aim to embed IRISE values into the fabric of KU's organizational culture through intentional communication, meaningful recognition, and strategic integration with existing systems. Building upon established university structures rather than creating new ones offers the greatest potential for sustainability and lasting impact. By implementing these recommendations, KU can ensure that the IRISE values transcend from the conceptual ideals they currently are and truly become part of the fundamental structure and culture of our campus community. The University of Kansas has an opportunity to actively shape its culture, fostering leadership and creating a community that thrives on integrity, respect, innovation, stewardship, and excellence. We rise together for IRISE.

Participants and Acknowledgements

Staff Fellows

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Mentors and Speakers

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- Mary Banwart, Associate Vice Provost for Faculty Development, Mentoring, and Growth, Office of Faculty Affairs *
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- Mike Broadwell, Executive Director of Administrative Services, KU Libraries *
- Mike Denning, Director, Office of Graduate Military Programs *
- Tammara Durham, Vice Provost, Office of Student Affairs ^
- Douglas Girod, Chancellor ^
- Kimberly Grunewald, General Counsel and Vice Chancellor for Legal Affairs ^
- Saralyn Reece Hardy, Marilyn Stokstad Director, Spencer Museum of Art *^
- Derek Kwan, Executive Director, Lied Center of Kansas *^
- Callie Long, Vice Chancellor, Operations *
- Nelson Mosley, Chief of Police & Director, KU Police Department *

Group Interview Units

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Appendices

Appendix A : Survey Questions and Quantitative Results

1. How long have you worked at the University of Kansas?
   a. Less than 1 year
   b. 1-5 years
   c. 5-10 years
   d. 11+ years

2. How familiar are you with KU's IRISE Culture Charter? (Scale)
   a. Not familiar at all
   b. Slightly familiar
   c. Moderately familiar
   d. Very familiar
   e. Extremely familiar

3. If you are familiar with the IRISE Culture Charter and its values/virtues, how have you learned about it? (select all that apply)
   a. Provost Office
   b. Governance
   c. Jayhawks Rising Strategic Plan
   d. Chancellor's Office
   e. Orientation or Training
   f. University website
   g. Internal communication (emails, newsletters, etc.)
   h. Meetings or conversations with colleagues
   i. Other:

4. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements? (Agree, somewhat agree, neutral, somewhat disagree, disagree)
   a. I understand what each of the IRISE values/virtues means in practice.
   b. The university's core values/virtues align with its mission and goals.
   c. The university's values/virtues are integrated into leadership's decision-making process.
   d. University leadership's actions align with the IRISE values/virtues even during times of challenge and change.
   e. The culture of the university is one that values me and cares about my well-being.
   f. My unit incorporates the IRISE Culture Charter and requests feedback on community culture based on these values/virtues.
   g. I see these values/virtues reflected in my daily work and interactions.
   h. The IRISE Culture Charter provides a way for me to discuss issues, conflicts, and ideas within my workplace.

5. Are there any units or teams at KU that are exemplars of the IRISE Culture Charter? If so, which?

6. What opportunities do you see for IRISE values/virtues and community culture within your unit or the university as a whole?

7. What challenges do you see in aligning units or university culture to the values/virtues in the IRISE Culture Charter?

8. Is there anything else you would like to share about your experience with the university's core values/virtues or suggestions for improvement?

Thank you for taking the time to relate your experiences at KU regarding community culture and the IRISE Culture Charter. We have a few more questions regarding culture at the unit-level if you have a bit more time to help us understand further integration. Does your position include a supervisory role?

1. YES
   a. Have you promoted any training or resources amongst your team related to the IRISE Culture Charter?
   b. Are these values/virtues integrated into your leadership philosophy and reflected in actual practice (i.e. meetings, communications, etc.)? If yes, please describe how. Do you use IRISE values/virtues in mentoring and supervising your reports? If yes, please describe how.
   c. How do you recognize or celebrate members within your unit/team that embody the IRISE values/virtues and create community?

2. NO
   a. Does your unit leadership embodies IRISE values in their decision-making and actions? How so?
   b. Does your unit acknowledge and celebrate staff whose work aligns with the IRISE Values? If yes, how so and how often?
   c. Do supervisors provide adequate resources to support staff in aligning and promoting the IRISE Values?

Appendix B: Focus Group Questions

In most interviews, question #5 was skipped by the interviewers as it was answered during #2

1. How would you describe the community culture of your unit? How would you describe the community culture of KU as a whole?

2. Does your unit have internal values that are different from the IRISE values?
   a. If so, can you discuss what they are, when and how they are talked about, and how you feel about them?

   b. Do you see your values relating to the IRISE Culture Charter?

3. Do you feel as though the IRISE values (Integrity, Respect, Innovation, Stewardship, and Excellence) fit with your department?
   a. How do you see them reflected in your unit?
   b. Are there any values that you feel as though you or your unit exemplify or apply most to you?

4. How do you or others actively foster community culture within your unit?
   a. What activities or conversations do you do/have to foster community?
   b. Are there individuals more responsible for creating a community? If so, why them?
   c. Are there ways your unit brings IRISE values to life that might be shared as best practices across campus?

5. Does IRISE or Community Culture have a place in your unit's planning process – strategic or otherwise?

6. What do you think might impede efforts to create more welcoming, inclusive, and healthy workplace cultures?

7. If KU were a values-driven organization what would that look like both in your unit and across the campus community?
   a. What do you wish KU would do to foster community culture?
   b. What are your hopes for how KU culture might grow or evolve in the next five years?

8. How do leaders in your unit model the IRISE values (or not)?

KU