

# ORGANIZATIONAL TRUST IN HIGHER EDUCATION

SCHOOL OF NURSING

UNIVERSITY of LOUISVILLE



CENTER FOR FAMILY &  
COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

- A mixed methods research study was conducted with the 7855 employees of the University of Louisville. The employees of UofL were invited via email to complete an on-line survey, with a total of 2091 completed surveys for a response rate of 27%. There were 50 employees in the School of Nursing who completed the survey.
- Results from the survey indicate the following key differences in trust and related domains:
  - Scores on trust in the university and the unit were higher for the School of Nursing than UofL employees overall, suggesting that trust is higher in this unit than elsewhere. Discrimination scores were also lower in the School of Nursing than UofL overall.
  - Trust was higher among white and female respondents, as well as staff and probationary/other faculty.
  - Scores on dimensions of organizational culture and climate showed areas of strength include peer and supervisor support. Areas for growth are procedural justice, psychological safety, and leadership.
  - Analysis of workplace outcomes showed that secondary traumatic stress and burnout are lower in the School of Nursing than UofL overall; however, job stress is higher in this unit.
  - Satisfaction and intent to stay are higher in Nursing than the overall university.
- Additionally, 150 focus groups are being conducted across campus with 7 groups in the School of Nursing completed to date.
- From the focus groups, the following key themes and recommendations have been identified.
  - Themes: 1) Lack of communication and transparency, including a) Lack of clarity around policies and procedures and b) Impact on community partnerships. 2) Distrust of administration due to communication, funding challenges and turnover. 3) Feeling undervalued due to bureaucratic red tape, lack of recognition of efforts toward goals. 4) Injustice, oppression, and unfairness witnessed in unit and university.
  - Recommendations: 1) Discoverable documents with embedded decision-making including policies and procedures. 2) Engage in frequent and proactive communication; explore other communication strategies. Consider a media campaign to rebuild community reputation and highlight community engaged research and service. 3) Develop recognition strategies such as awards, time, feedback and provide professional development opportunities. 4) Make grievance procedures clear and adherent. Host listening sessions on unit concerns.
- There are no cost strategies, resources within the University such as the Employee Success Center, and training/supports through the Center for Family and Community Well-Being that can be accessed to address these identified needs.

### BACKGROUND

Issues with trust tend to stem from one of three sources: rapid or frequent changes without perceived control, violations or betrayals of trust, and perceived injustices in the workplace. Restoration of trust in organizations follows a parallel process to that of restoration of trust in interpersonal relationships, which includes the following seven steps: 1) observe and acknowledge what has happened; 2) allow feelings to surface; 3) get support; 4) reframe the experience; 5) take responsibility; 6) forgive yourself and others; and 7) let go and move on (Reina & Reina, 2018). For step #1, there are specific strategies that include acknowledging the negative, communicating awareness of trust issues, assessing the health of the organization, and acknowledging feelings. For step #2, people must be given the opportunity to express concerns, issues and feelings in a constructive manner and be helped to verbalize feelings. For steps 3 through 5, leaders must step up to support employees needs for support and advocacy, reframe the experience by placing in context and recognizing mistakes and choices, and ultimately taking responsibility for leadership role in these issues. The latter includes taking responsibility moving forward by managing expectations and keeping promises. The last two steps of this process include the hard work of forgiveness and letting go through radical acceptance and ongoing support.

Organizational trust has been defined as positive expectations individuals have about the intent and behaviors of multiple organizational members based on organizational roles, relationships, experiences and interdependencies (Shockley-Zalaback et al, 2000). Organizational trust is often comprised of perceptions of competence, openness and honesty, concern for employees, reliability and identification. Trust is linked to employee job satisfaction and overall perceptions of organizational effectiveness in this and other studies. For example, Dahmardeh and colleagues (2019) found that organizational trust has a positive and significant effect on organizational commitment and participation.

Trust and justice are interrelated variables in organizational health. Research on trust in organizations shows that it facilitates relationships, cooperation between individuals and organizations, organizational commitment, and employees' motivation to innovate (Hubbell et al, 2007). Organizational justice, which refers to perceptions of the fairness of workplace outcomes or processes, is often considered an antecedent to managerial and organizational trust. Hubbell and colleagues found that procedural justice was the strongest predictor of both organizational and managerial trust, distributive justice only predicted managerial trust, and interactional justice did not predict either type of trust.

The Center for Family and Community Well-Being has a long history of research on issues of organizational culture and climate, including issues of trust, and the impact on organizational functioning and employee well-being and retention. This research stems from identified needs at the University of Louisville in the area of organizational trust. Listening sessions across campus have identified a wide range of issues of trust at many levels of the organization. However, a systematic and rigorous research approach to understand these issues of trust and related factors is needed. Hence, this mixed methods research study has been funded to gather this drive to provide a deeper understanding of needs and opportunities for growth.



#### Research Questions

The research questions include the following:

1. What is the current perception of organizational trust at UofL? How does trust in university leadership differ from trust in unit leadership?
2. How do ratings of organizational trust vary by position and other individual characteristics?
3. How is organizational trust related to other dimensions of organizational culture and climate?
4. How does organizational trust impact job satisfaction, stress/burnout, and commitment to the organization?
5. What are the barriers or challenges to organizational trust? What are strengths and factors that inspire trust in organizations/leaders?

#### Design

This research is utilizing a mixed methods research design that includes a survey and focus groups. The survey will consist of standardized measures of organizational health, trust, and other relevant domains to this research. The survey was administered to the approximately 7855 employees at UofL.

#### Sample

The 7855 employees of UofL were invited via email to complete a survey, with a target participation rate of 20% (N=1571). The total number of surveys completed was 2091 for a response rate of 27%.

#### Survey

The following variables were measured using the identified questions/scales.

Outcome	Scale
1. Individual Characteristics	Demographic Questions (age, race, gender, position, marital status, caregiving, sexual orientation, income), Adult Attachment Scale(Collins, 2006),
2. Organizational Trust	Organizational Trust Inventory (Cummings & Bromiley, 1996)
3. Job Satisfaction	Copenhagen Burnout (Christensen et al, 2005), Bride Secondary Traumatic Stress (Bride et al, 2004), Job Satisfaction Scale, Intent to Stay Scale, Job Stress Scale (Cohen, 2004)
4. Culture/Climate	Psychological Safety (Edmonson, 1999), Leadership Scale (Potter et al, 2016), Learning Culture (Potter et al, 2016), Peer support (Settoon & Mossholder, 2002), Supervisor Support Scale (Cheng et al, 2015), Workplace Prejudice and Discrimination Inventory (James et al, 1994), OPM Survey, Procedural Justice Scale (Miller et al, 2012)

#### Research Procedures

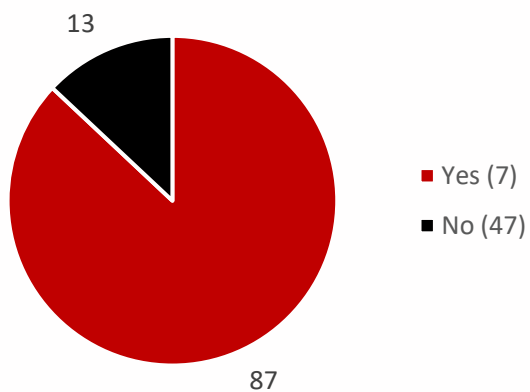
Participants consented to answering survey questions using a consent preamble. Invitations to participate in the study were sent by the research team via email. On-line surveys were created and distributed using an online software platform.

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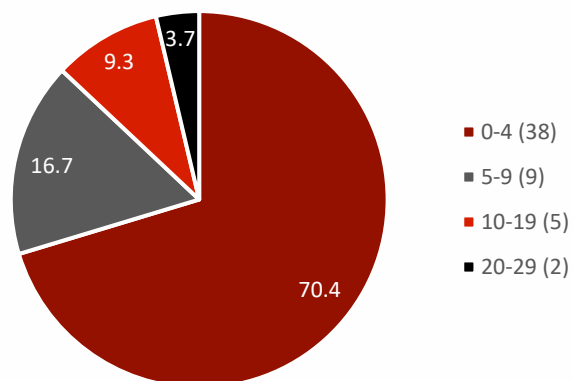
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## DEMOGRAPHICS

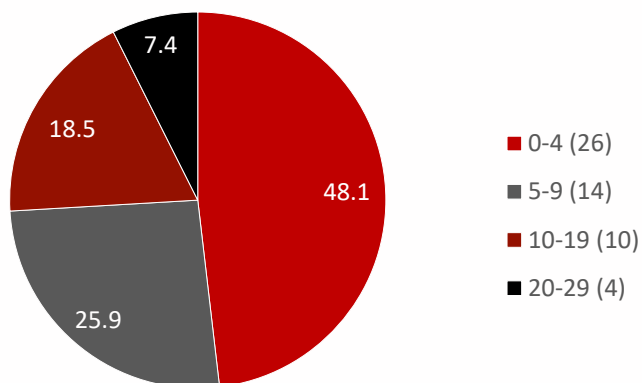
Are you a remote employee?



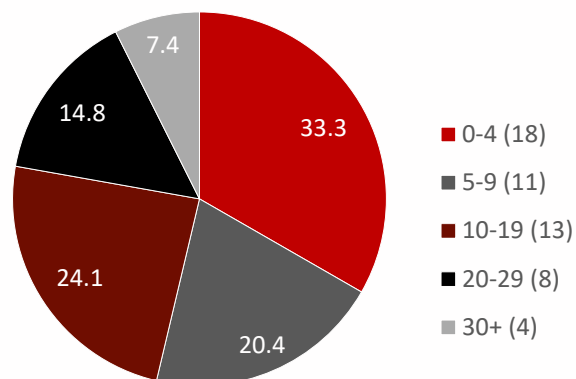
Years in Current Position



Years at UofL



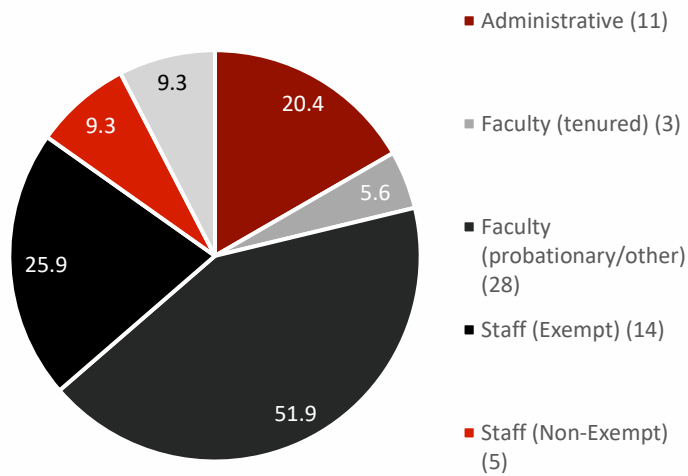
Years in Academia



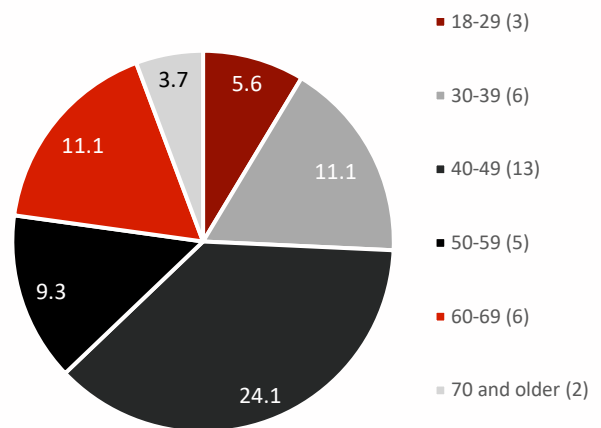
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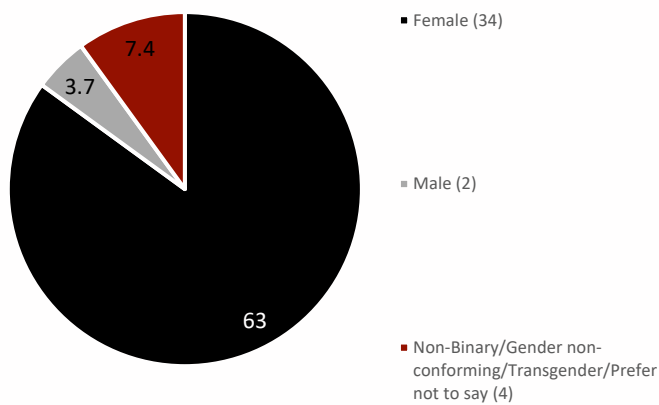
### Position



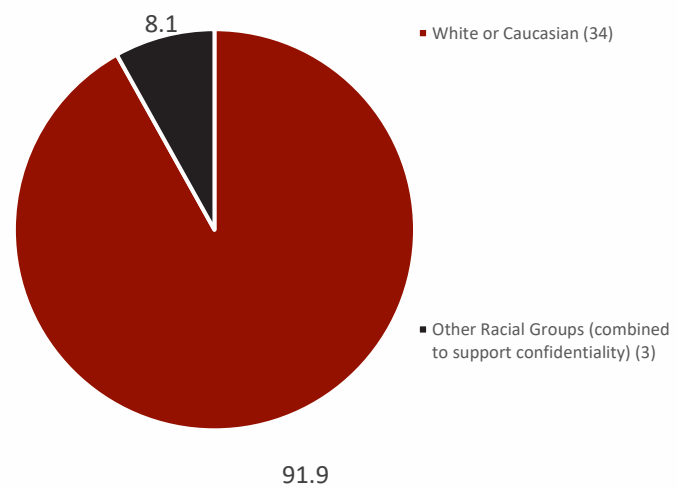
### Age



### Gender



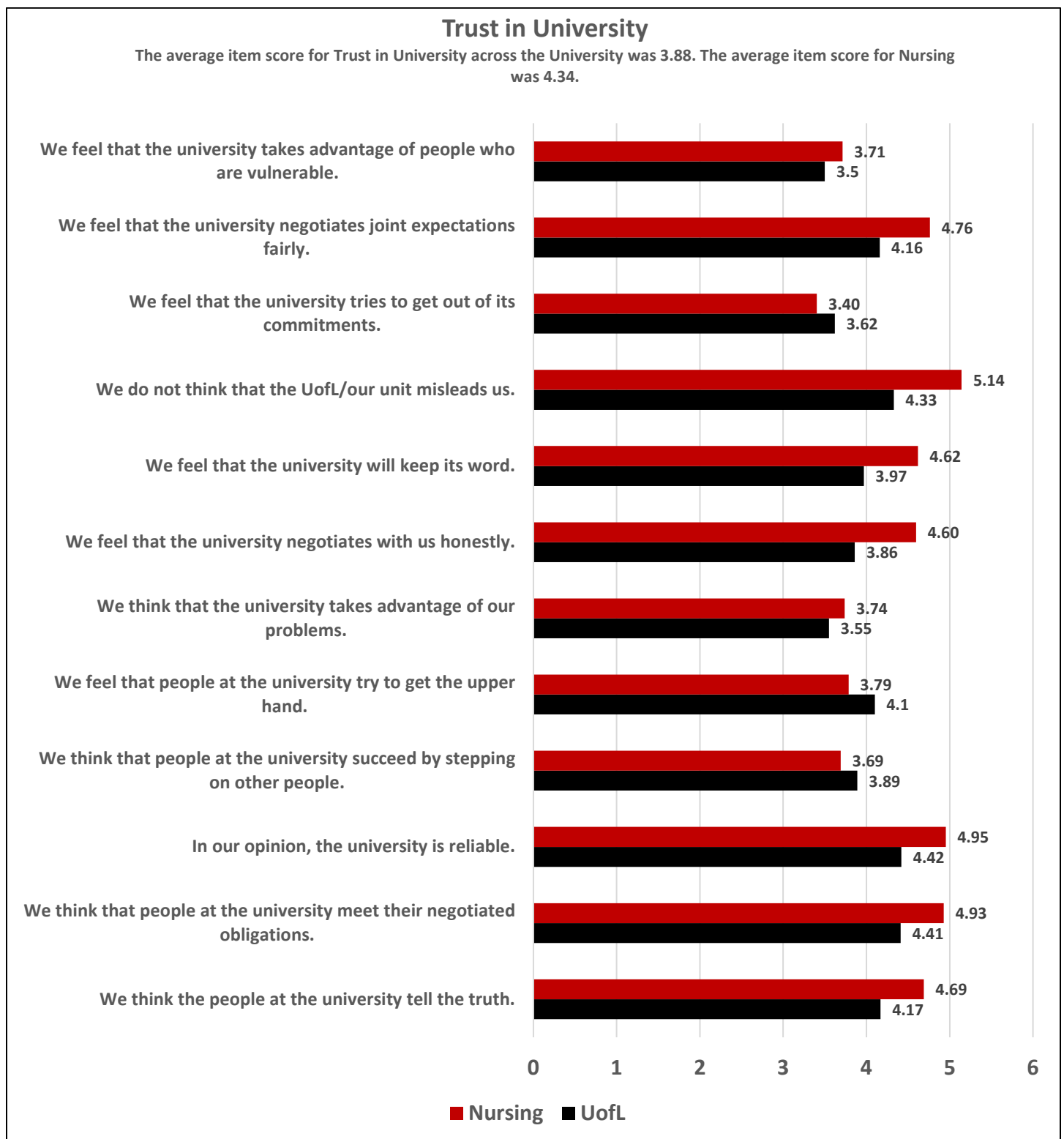
### Race



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### TRUST SCORES

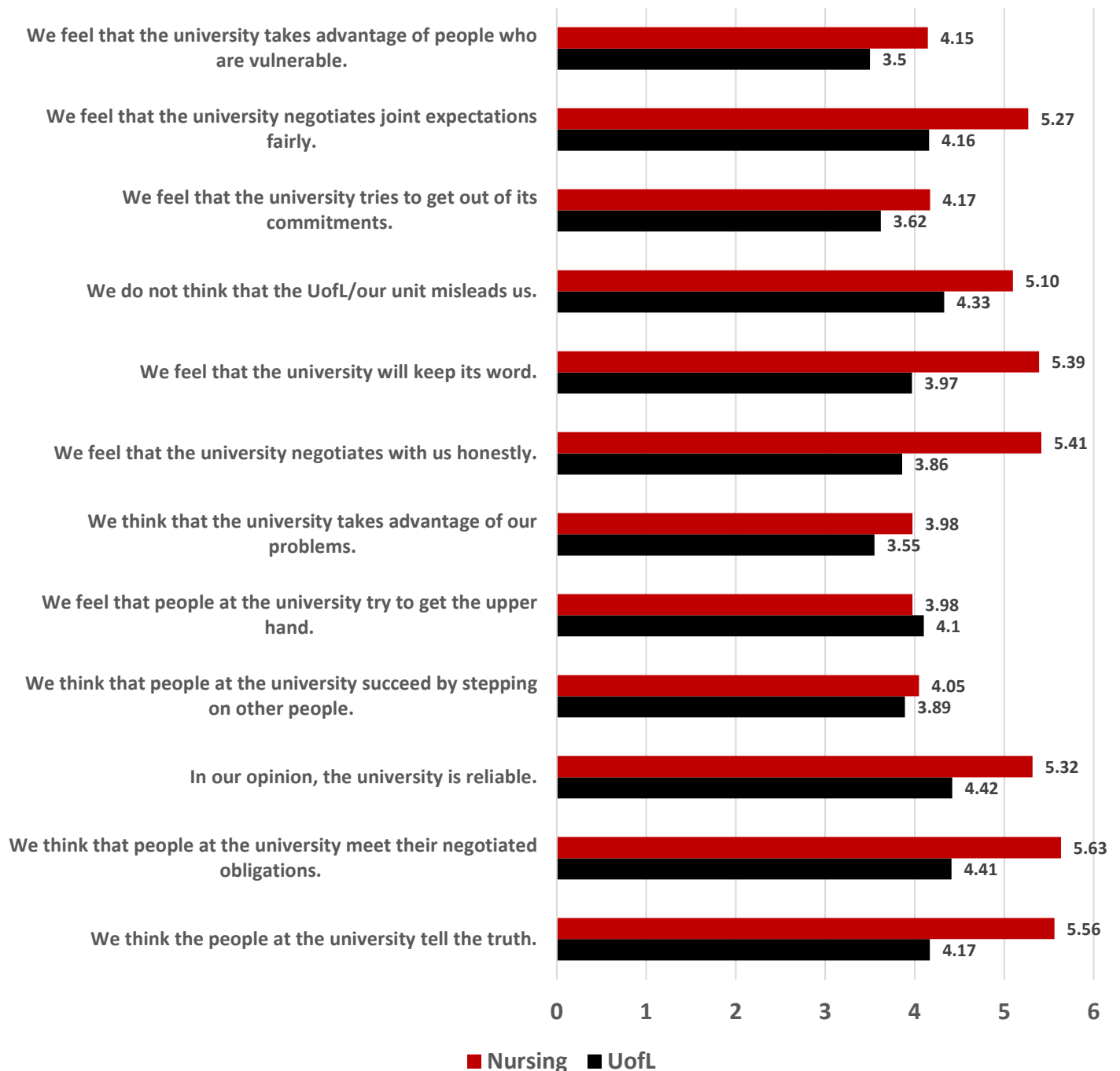


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### Trust in the Unit

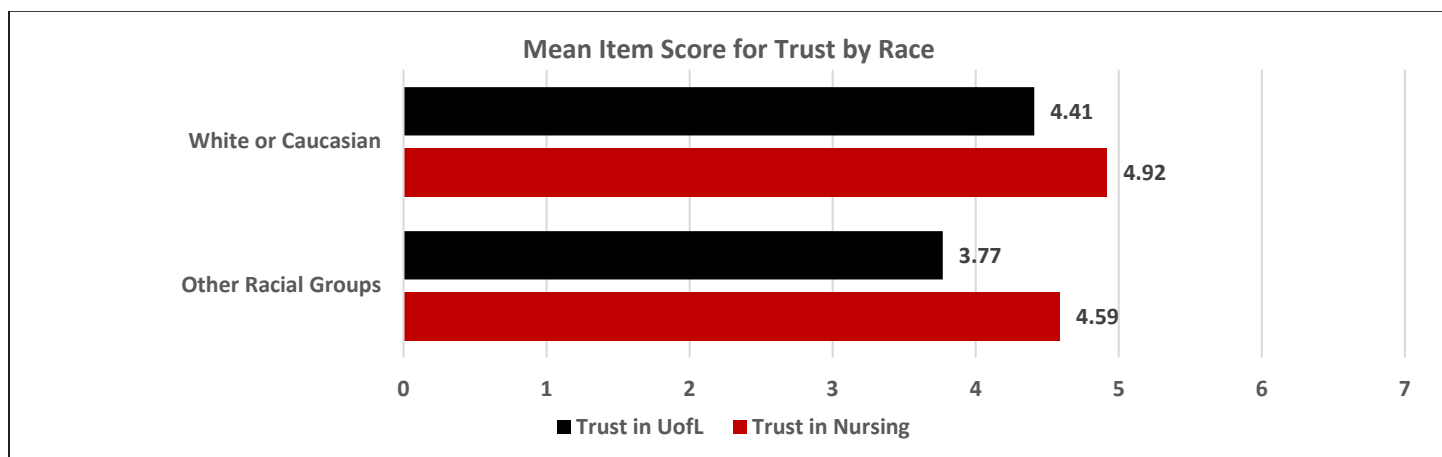
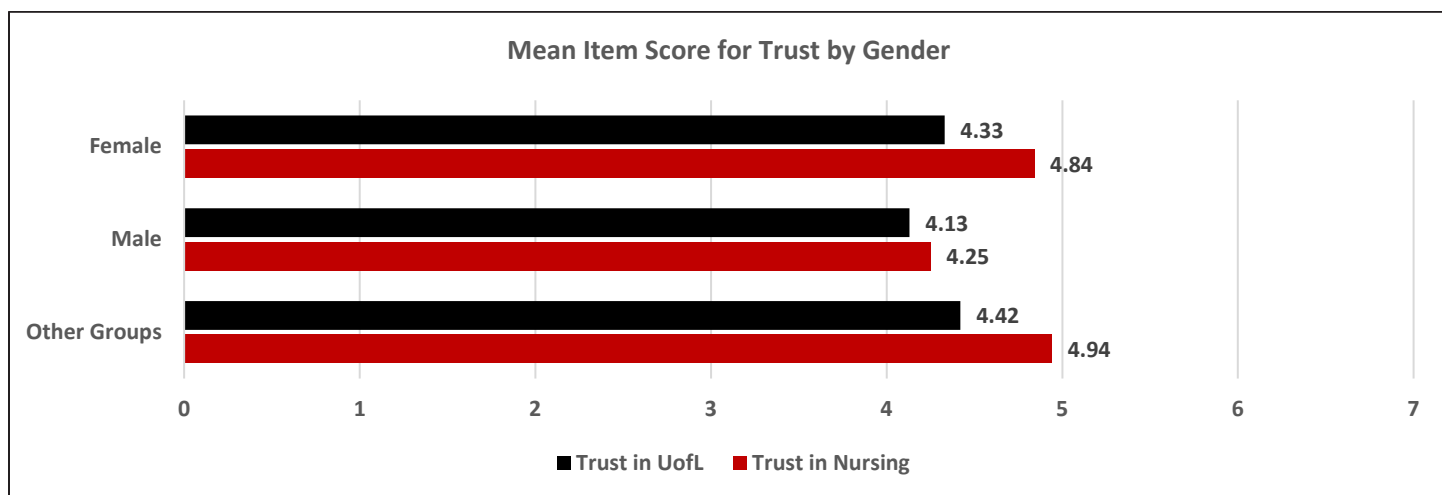
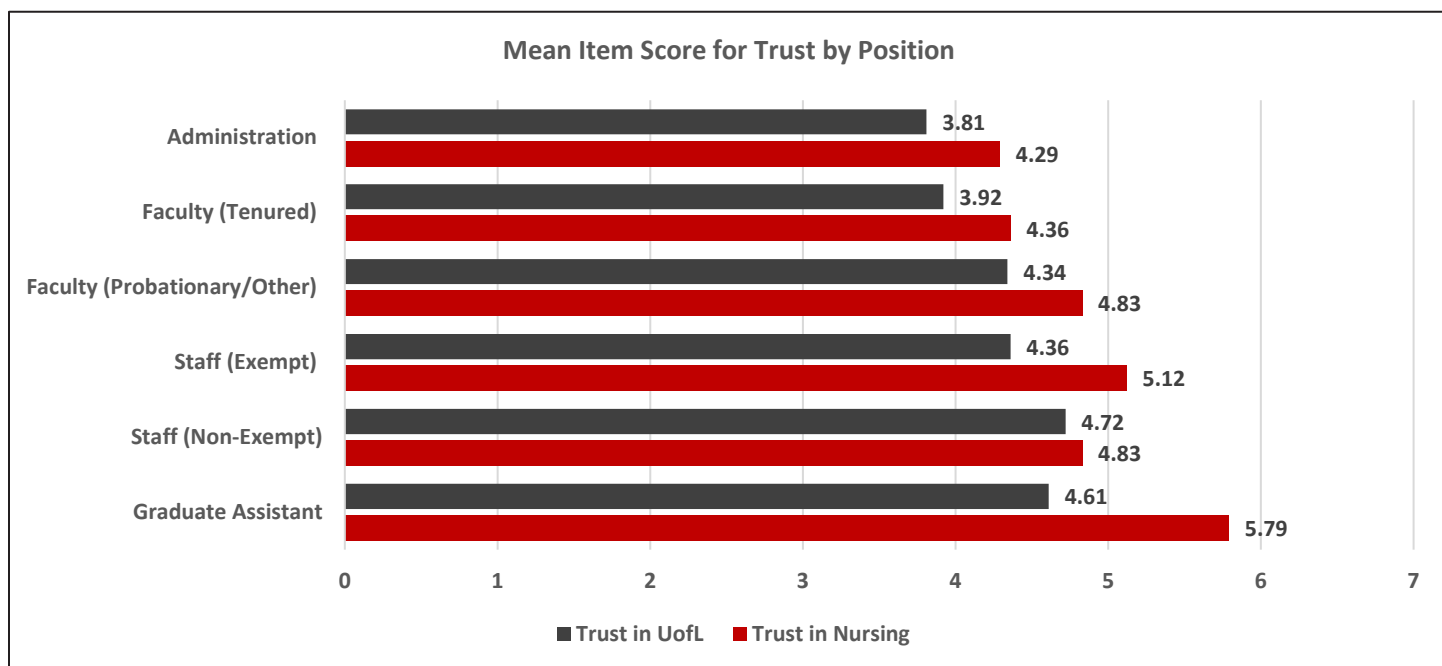
The average item score for Trust in Unit at UofL was 4.47. The average item score for Nursing was 4.83.





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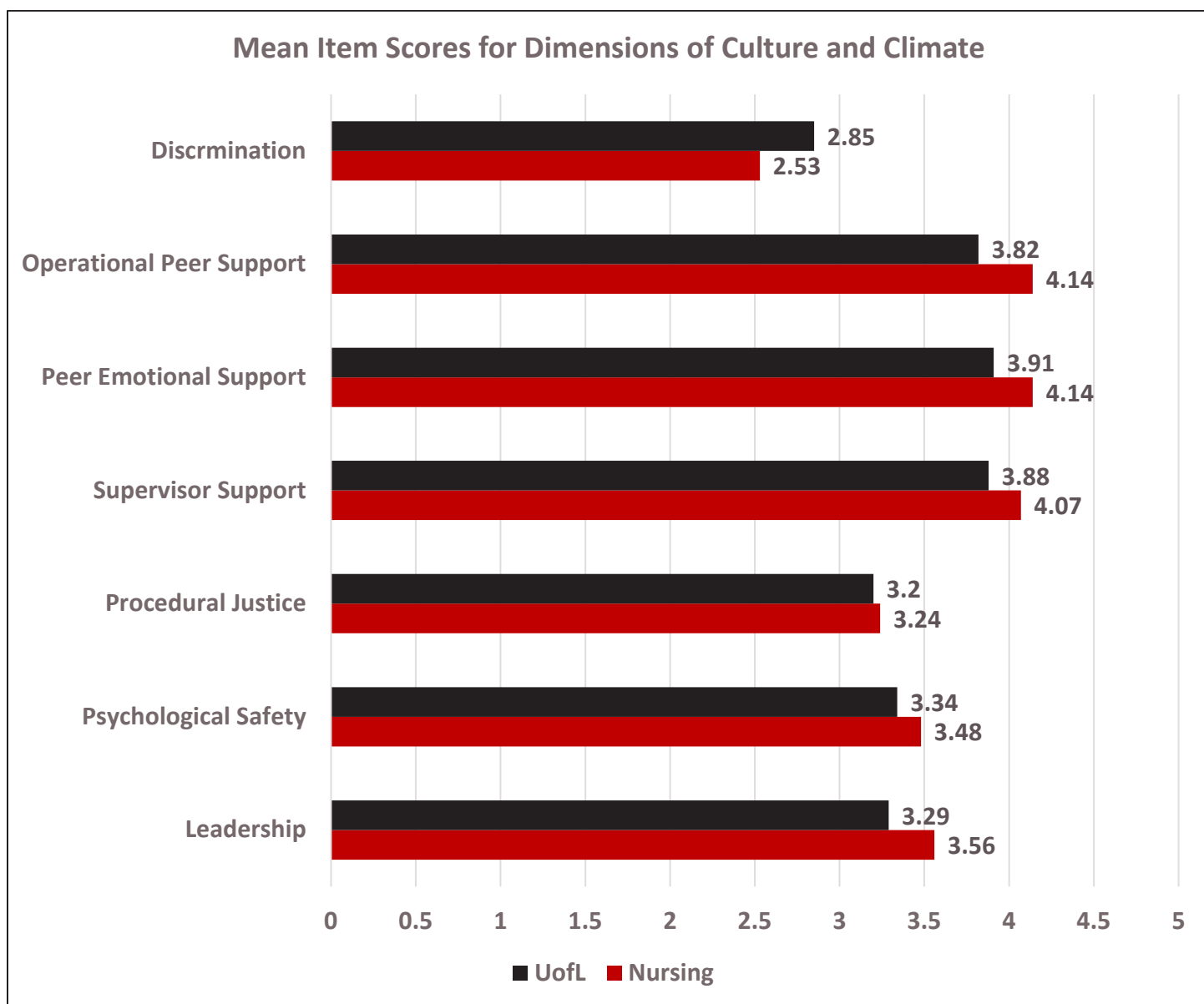
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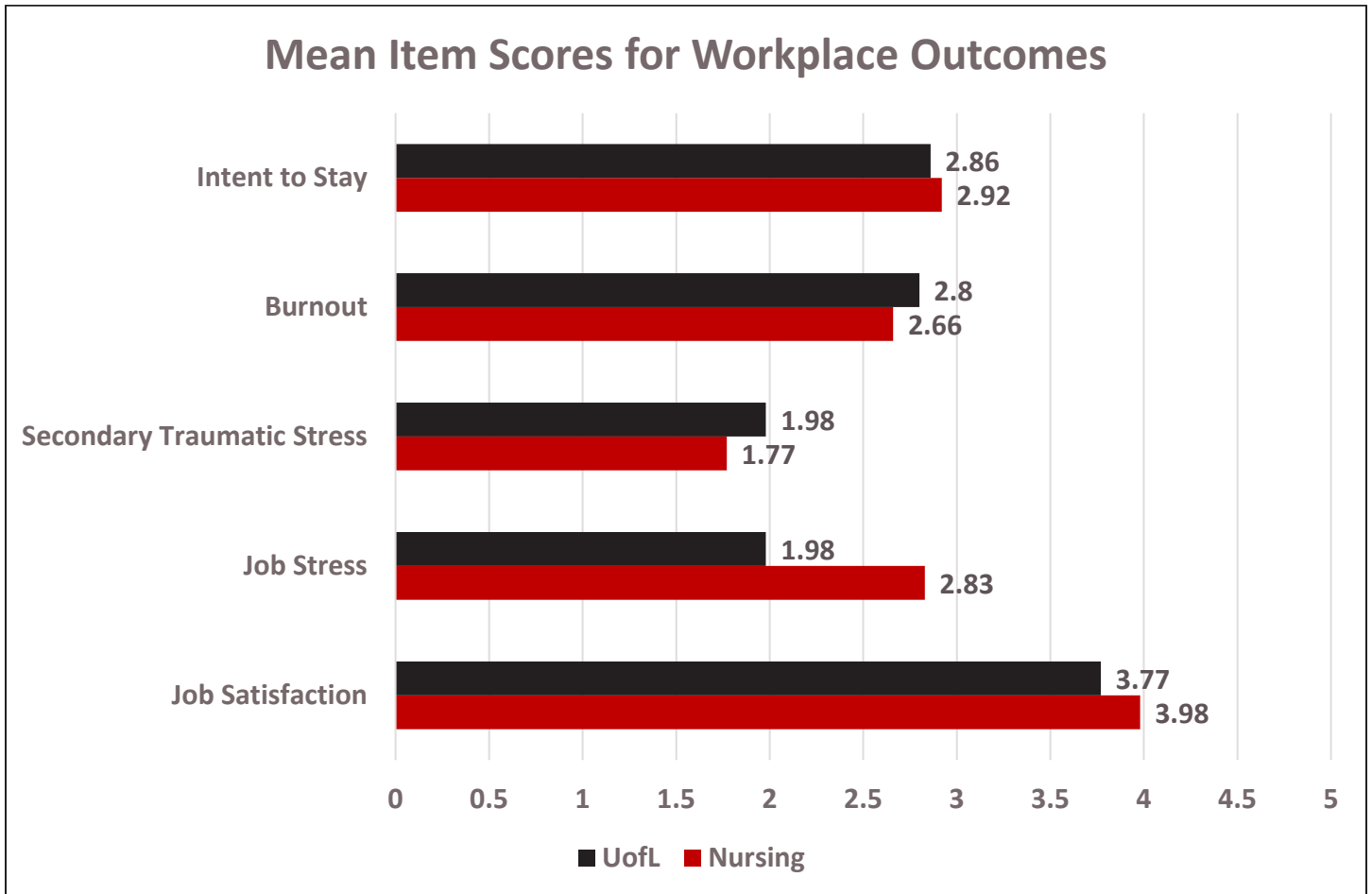
## CULTURE AND CLIMATE SCORES



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## WORKPLACE OUTCOMES



There are significant positive correlations between all measures of organizational culture/climate and trust in both the University and Unit: leadership, psychological safety, procedural justice, social peer support, operational peer support, supervisor support, discrimination. There are also significant positive correlations between trust and all measures of job satisfaction: job stress, job satisfaction, secondary traumatic stress, burnout, and **intent to stay**. This is consistent with the literature on the impact of organizational trust on retention/turnover and highlights the importance of understanding and addressing these findings.

### QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

This research utilized a mixed methods research design that included a survey and focus groups. The survey consisted of standardized measures of organizational health, trust, and other relevant domains to this research and was administered to the approximately 7855 employees at UofL. Focus groups were conducted in each unit on campus by position, with groups for faculty, staff, and graduate students. There were 150 focus groups offered across the campuses over one year. These focus groups were offered in person and online.

The following questions will be asked in the focus groups:

- 1) There is an acknowledgement through this work that there are trust issues at UofL. What does that mean to you? As an individual? In your unit specifically? For the university as a whole?
- 2) What comes to mind when you think of U of L's commitment to building trust with employees and community partners? (not the outcome but the commitment to this endeavor)
- 3) What are barriers to restoring trust once it has been violated? Individual and organizational?
- 4) What does it take for a leader to earn trust? What does it take for an organization to earn trust? (Follow up if needed: What, in your opinion, is the #1 trait that signifies trust?)
- 5) How does perceived injustice/unfairness contribute to trust issues at UofL?
- 6) Describe violations of trust that you have experienced or of which you have direct knowledge that have impacted overall trust at the University.
- 7) What has U of L done to facilitate trust? What have you heard about, or witnessed that has inspired you toward organizational trust?
- 8) How has rapid or unexpected change contributed to trust issues at UofL?
- 9) When you think of a high trust relationship you have experienced, what traits are present? And how are those demonstrated behaviorally?
- 10) What is the role of each of the following in building, maintaining, and restoring trust?
  - a. Leaders at higher levels of the University
  - b. Your Dean/Director/Supervisor/leader in your unit
  - c. Co-workers
  - d. Students or others
  - e. Policies/procedures
  - f. Decision making processes
- 11) How do you extend trust to others? What are the barriers to doing so at UofL?
- 12) When you think about restoring trust, what is the role of promises or commitments by the University, leaders, and others?

### FINDINGS

#### School of Nursing

Faculty and staff focus groups explored perceptions and experiences contributing to distrust in the university system. Collectively, the most frequently mentioned trust issues were lack of communication and transparency (21 times), distrust of administration (19 times), feeling undervalued (13 times), injustice and oppression (13 times), and unfairness (11 times). See Figure 1. School of Nursing Priority Trust Issues for a display of all themes and frequencies, i.e. number of times mentioned in focus groups.

#### Differences by Role

Data collected from the School of Nursing was not separated into groups based on role to protect the confidentiality of participants as part of a small department. Next, we explore the common themes from the transcripts and offer related recommendations.

#### Lack of Communication and Transparency

The top trust issue that was discussed among the School of Nursing faculty and staff was mistrust caused by a lack of communication and transparency. Participants spoke about this as a priority concern of trust impacting the School of Nursing and the University as a whole. Lack of communication and transparency was discussed as impacting three major areas: 1) Communication within the department, 2) Communication across the University, and 3) Communication with the broader community.

*Communication within the department.* Participants discussed feeling that trust was impacted by a lack of communication and transparency regarding departmental concerns. Participants disclosed feeling that a lack of transparency around departmental issues created feelings of uncertainty and discomfort: “...so there were some issues that happened that no one really knows what they were about...it does make you feel a little uncomfortable because you just really don’t know what’s going on.” This feeling was also prominent around departmental policies that were not transparent, and that important decisions impacting the entirety of the school were made in siloes and behind closed doors.

*Communication across the University.* Participants also discussed feeling that trust was impacted by a lack of communication and transparency from the University administration. Mistrust was created when participants felt that important decisions were made without the regard, knowledge, or input from university employees: “I think it’s just decisions feeling very top down, rather than collective...Just this is the way it was going to be, and it probably always was.” One participant noted that blockages of communication between upper administration and University faculty and staff creates mistrust: “Because we feel that there’s always this division between the administration for the university and then the rest of us, and that nothing is flowing.... And so, we don’t really know what’s happening, what’s going on, but having more updates.” This perspective was shared among multiple participants, who noted that not understanding what was going on contributed to a sense of unsafety in employment: “...there are things we don’t get information about that apply to us or affect me, whether its financially or my job. That frustrates us, not getting information, hearing about it in the news before it is made public to us.” One participant used the example of Dr. Bendapudi’s departure in 2021 as an example of how a lack of communication and transparency on the University level that was particularly hurtful: “I think everyone was blindsided by it...I don’t really know what the best course of best decision on that situation, but I think that’s one that a lot of people felt hurt, felt pretty wounded about that.” Participants discussed feeling unstable or unacknowledged when transparency was not valued at the University level.

*Communication with the broader community.* Finally, participants discussed the impact of a perceived lack of communication and transparency on relationships between the University and the broader community. One participant discussed the impact of university scandals on the trust with community partner relations: *“And your external stakeholders, they don’t understand...They don’t see that if you have one person in power that’s corrupt, well the whole organization has to be corrupt...And the frustration is, once again, you’ve got that collateral information.”*

Participants felt that the lack of transparency with the community was hurtful to the community partners: *“People just refer to [community research efforts], and it seems like there’s a lot of hurt feelings. But since we’re on the outside, we don’t know.”* This lack of transparency was also hurtful to the researchers who work closely with community: *“Not taking the time to update the rest of the community or individuals. If individuals were hurt because of an issue, not following up personally with them is a barrier. There’s no intention to build that bridge back up.”*

Finally, participants were concerned that community partnerships were being glossed over: *“I have major concerns regarding how we are approaching partnering with community partners and others...I am really concerned that we are trying to speak the speak before we walk the walk.”*

### **Distrust of Administration**

Related to the distrust caused by a perceived lack of communication and transparency was trust related to distrust of administration. Participants who were newer to the University reported feeling that distrust of the administration predates their employment: *“I actually haven’t been here long. I know that there were some issues before I got here that UofL that has been working on...I can see from coworkers that have been here longer that they have institutional trust issues.”* Other participants noted that University administration had its work cut out for them in order to regain trust: *“They kind of need to level up to everyone else’s vision, I guess.”*

Other participants felt that administration could not build trust while cutting funding: *“...Sometimes trust requires investment, on a bigger scale investment means money. I don’t believe our university is willing to invest in others, budgets have been slashed and there’s not the flexibility to do that.”*

For some participants, even the act of participating in the University Trust study was cause for skepticism: *“My gut instinct was that there’s probably something right there that I might not be aware of. Something is not going to be good, probably...Anytime any university is just trying to...strengthening trust, it’s a red flag to me.”* Reflecting a similar perspective, when asked what their thoughts were regarding the university’s commitment to building trust with employees and community partners, one participant simply stated: *“Maybe I’ll see it when I see it.”*

### **Feeling Undervalued**

Participants reported trust being impacted by feeling undervalued by administration. Feeling undervalued was often related to the perceived lack of communication and transparency between administration, faculty, staff, and students. One participant noted, *“Lots of work is done, and effort put forth, and little has been paid attention to. That has eroded my trust because that was before me.”* They went on to say *“A lot of these people have been working together for social justice and those type of causes long before I got here.”*

Participants also discussed experiences with university bureaucracy, funding challenges, and “red tape” that contributed to feeling undervalued. One participant described feeling disappointed when abruptly turned away from what they believed to be a cost included with their employment: *“And there’s no explicit policy out there just so when I... It’s time for me to renew membership, they just say, ‘No.’”*



Participants felt undervalued when they felt that they had contributed greatly to the efforts of the school and/or university but were not acknowledged or offered proper recognition or thanks.

### **Injustice, Oppression, and Unfairness**

Some participants discussed trust being impacted by feeling undervalued for reasons related to injustice, oppression, and unfairness. Participants reported that even when they did not experience it firsthand, simply witnessing or learning about instances of injustice, oppression, or unfairness at the School or University was enough to impact trust.

Several participants discussed experiences had by themselves or others that involved discrimination, tokenization, or exploitation based on identity and/or life experience, which significantly impacted trust.

Other participants noted that some identity groups were routinely left out of community discussions regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion, creating an experience of erasure and neglect. This experience was related to diminished trust: *"I agree that diversity means it has to be really diverse. Everyone, not, 'Okay just this race, that race, those races,' but nothing about one particular one.... And I just want to see that it's really diverse, true diversity."*

Finally, participants worried about how University efforts to become the nation's premiere anti-racist university would impact trust with faculty, staff, students, and community partners, if they were unable to "walk the walk." *"Because it feels like the commitment [to becoming an anti-racist university] isn't to building trust. It's to partnering and showing outcomes. Like I said before, we're stepping ahead. We're trying to skip the part where you actually do some work that's uncomfortable."*

## **SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Recommendations**

Focus groups held at the School of Nursing reflected several priority trust issues that have impacted faculty, staff, and students. Each of the identified trust issues build on one another and have interrelated drivers and outcomes. The following recommendations are offered to address the identified trust problems.

#### **Addressing the lack of communication and transparency**

Focus groups identified a significant trust issue related to perceived lack of communication and transparency within the School of Nursing and within the University as a whole.

- Recommendations: The School of Nursing departmental administration should prioritize open and transparent communication with faculty, staff, and students about all decisions, considerations, and initiatives. The university and unit should create discoverable documents with embedded decision-making documentation and provide regular updates on school and university initiatives that faculty and staff contribute to.

Participants also reported that muddiness around policies and procedures has contributed to a lack of trust.

- Recommendations: The School of Nursing departmental administration should ensure all faculty and staff have ready access to updated information about departmental policies and procedures. The School of Nursing administration should create a public and discoverable documents regarding all department policies, and provide regular communication to all faculty, staff, and students regarding every policy change.

Participants also described trust being impacted by feeling as if community partnerships were impacted by low levels of trust with the University.

- Recommendations: The university and unit should create public, discoverable documents with embedded decision-making documentation, and provide regular updates on school and university initiatives that community partners contribute to.
- Recommendations on how to improve distrust in the public sphere include launching a media campaign aimed at repairing the university's reputation, which can include highlighting community-engaged work and scholarship, advocacy at local and national levels, diversity of students, faculty, and staff, and accomplishments around equity, inclusion, and belongingness. The University should also use the media to highlight nationally and internationally recognized research, teaching, and service to position the University of Louisville as a premier research institution to the public.

### **Addressing distrust of administration**

Faculty and staff at the School of Nursing have described feeling distrustful of administration at the departmental level and university wide. Trust has been impacted by a lack of communication and transparency, funding challenges, and turnover.

- Recommendations: To address the issue of distrust in the administration in the School of Nursing and the University, it is recommended that the administration evaluate the practices that foster an environment of distrust in employees. The evaluation should include an assessment of the bureaucracy and communication processes, and measures should be taken to improve transparency with faculty and staff. The aforementioned strategy of a media campaign can also be used to rebuild trust in administration both within and outside the university.

### **Addressing feeling undervalued**

Faculty experience being undervalued, which stems from a lack of communication, transparency, and accountability from their unit and university administration. Complexities with bureaucracy and "red tape" with no clear communication explaining these procedures and impacts on funding can also lead employees to feel undervalued. Little to no recognition of efforts toward department or University goals can lead to poor job satisfaction and low morale.

- Recommendations: For the University to retain its most effective employees, steps should be taken to address underappreciation. Being undervalued can lead to work disengagement, lower performance, and burnout, which can lead to productivity losses and turnover among faculty and staff. Both effects will cost the university more money and perpetuate distrust in the school (as reflected in the Trust Study Data). The University should engage in strategies to praise and offer thanks to employees, offer growth and development opportunities (which are built into employees' work plans), provide recognition rewards, and hold celebrations to recognize achievements. Since financial challenges may be present within the university and unit, there should be a consideration of giving the gift of time, i.e. a day off. The University and the unit should invest in creating a culture of feedback and transparency, where the administration and faculty show appreciation and recognition for faculty and staff.

### **Addressing injustice, oppression, and unfairness**

Faculty and staff in the School of Nursing expressed experiencing or witnessing injustice and oppression which contributed significantly to feelings of mistrust with the department and the university.

- Recommendations: The University and the School of Nursing should take action to eliminate oppression, injustice and discrimination. Procedures for following up after reports are made

should be transparent and open for feedback as employees feel unsupported by existing actions taken to address this significant issue. One recommended step is to offer training to employees on the pathways available for expressing grievances and concerns, such as the Office of the Ombuds, The Redbook (faculty grievance section), HR Policies & Procedures, Faculty Affairs Policies, and the University's Compliance Hotline. This training should be coupled with a listening session from leadership on improving communication around employees' concerns.

### **NEXT STEPS**

#### **No Cost Strategies:**

- Policy review/documentation/clarification
- Communication strategies
- Appreciation strategies
- Clarify/train in grievance processes
- Refine hiring processes

#### **Resources Provided by the University: Employee Success Center**

- Coaching Circles. A small group of employees who are committed to forming a safe space to work on things like supervision, white allyship, living the Cardinal Principles, etc.
- Individual Coaching. A staff member here will meet with you to help you craft a career growth plan, navigate challenges, and explore your noble purpose.
- Employee Resource Groups. There are seven active ERGs that provide opportunities for networking, leadership development, connection and belonging. Sometimes employees feel isolated based on an identity and an ERG can help them find a community of friends who share their experiences.
- Consultation for departmental leaders. Support for supervisors, chairs and others who want to strengthen the culture in their department or develop a climate of trust.
- DEI trainings through multiple divisions including focus on hiring/promotion.
- HR trainings/workshops

#### **Training offerings: CFCWB Training Offerings:**

- Trauma Informed Leadership
- Supportive Supervision
- Anti-Racism Training for Higher Education
- Stress Resiliency
- Secondary Traumatic Stress in the Workplace
- Appreciation Styles
- Giving and Receiving Effective Feedback
- Inclusive Decision Making