

## NACUFS (2025)

### Employee Development Program of the Year

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CREATE Program (Culinary Research and Enrichment Annual Travel Experience) --  
2024 Edition, San Diego

Washington and Lee University

#### Introduction:

During the COVID shutdown, we reevaluated our employee development strategy, then centered on a few administrators attending multiple conferences. We wanted to broaden the approach to include more people and shift greater focus on culinary development. Given our rural location, our culinarians often lack exposure to diverse cuisine or formal training. We had the idea to take a group to a major city and immerse them in its food culture. We developed 6 core goals for the program (centered around culinary exposure), brainstormed how the program could work, and drafted a proposal. Our VP approved the proposal, and...

#### Essay:

...CREATE (Culinary Research and Enrichment Annual Travel Experience) was born.

Our Executive Director leads CREATE each year. Every winter, participants are invited (hand-picked from all dining staff with focus on culinarians). In spring, preparatory meetings occur, and the itinerary and extensive curriculum book are developed. At 250+ pages, the book serves as the backbone of the program, containing program background, articles, reading about this year's location, and detailed information about each of the 50+ stops on the itinerary. Finally in June, the group departs on a very impactful trip.

This year, CREATE occurred over 6 days in San Diego. Each day's schedule was packed with diverse experiences that are otherwise unavailable to our team – sampling pan dulce from an authentic panaderia; partaking in an Ethiopian coffee ceremony; touring an urban farm at a plant-based restaurant; witnessing a sushi master's finesse while crafting an omakase; touring the kitchen after a Michelin-starred dinner; visiting two University dining programs; and much more. In all, participants tasted around 500 individual dishes, taking copious notes and photos.

Back on campus, CREATE's success is measured in many ways. Innovation in our menus. Authenticity of international dishes. Growing chef creativity. Employee and guest satisfaction.

#### Introduction:

The CREATE Program, now entering its fourth year, is well known across our dining program and especially among our culinary team members. Employees understand the significant investment that our university makes in this program and view it simultaneously as an opportunity and a reward to be striven for. In program evaluations, 100% of past participants stated that they would like to be included in a future year's CREATE. These employees view the program as one reason to stay with W&L, as do newer employees who set a goal of being invited to the program in the future (example below).

#### Essay:

As a tangible example, this year, one of our participants, a Senior Cook in our dining hall, was discussing the CREATE program with a newly hired Cook II. The new cook was fascinated and immediately said that she wanted to work towards being included in a future trip. That cook grew in her role and engagement throughout the year and has been invited to participate in the 2025 program.

Among those who have partaken in CREATE, retention has been outstanding. Since CREATE's inception, a total of 48 team members have been invited to participate. Of those, 47 are still employed full time on our team. The lone exception was a former dining director who was recruited to a top job out of state. Further, 5 of these employees have gone on to attain promotions within our program. Even beyond program participants, overall retention in Dining Services has increased steadily over the 4 years that the program has existed. Particularly in our culinary sector, since 2021, each year we have had to fill fewer full-time openings than the immediately previous year.

#### Introduction:

We are starting to use the CREATE program during the interview process for open culinary roles, although this year we had very few such openings. One place where we saw the CREATE program have a strong impact on recruitment was during our national search for a new Associate Director of Dining. Our search consultant through Spelman Johnson highlighted the program during introductory interviews with all candidates. Then, during the campus visits with finalists, our leadership team again highlighted and discussed the program as something valuable and unique to our program.

#### Essay:

Austin Benner, who ultimately was hired through this search process, recalls the impact it had on him as he went through the search process: "I remember discussing the CREATE program with my wife on our drive home from the campus visit and noting how it clearly demonstrated that employee career progression is a core value. It was evident that the department understands that reinvesting in staff not only broadens an individual's culinary experience but also reinforces the idea that sometimes, we need to expose our staff to examples of exceptional service and cuisine to help them fully grasp the level of experience we aim to provide our own campus community. The program helped me understand how the University prioritizes staying current with industry trends and recognizes the necessity of investing in its employees." Ultimately, the particulars of the CREATE program helped us land a high-caliber out-of-market candidate in this pivotal role.

Overall, unfilled openings in Dining Services, especially in culinary positions, have decreased each year that CREATE has been in existence. While the program is certainly not the only factor in that, we do view it as a valuable tool to recruit talented individuals to our team.

Introduction:

After each CREATE trip, participants complete an extensive feedback questionnaire to help us continually improve the program. For each of the program's stated goals (6 general goals plus another 4 or 5 goals specific to that year's program), participants rate how thoroughly the goal was achieved. The average goal-success rating was 9.55 out of 10. The final question asks them to rate their overall satisfaction with the CREATE experience, and the average score for that question is 9.89 out of 10. Clearly, those who participate in the program find it rewarding and return to campus feeling energized and supported.

Essay:

More broadly, the results of the learning that occurs during CREATE are evident across our dining program, and that breeds increased satisfaction in every team member. Our Marketplace Global Kitchen station tackles 16 international menus representing 5 continents. The authenticity and execution of these dishes are directly linked to the CREATE program. International students from the countries on the cycle frequently thank our team and comment that dishes remind them of "their mom's version" of the dish.

Marketplace Executive Chef Mike O'Byrne says this about CREATE: "Our Cooks marvel that a program like CREATE exists. For an hourly cook, or even a salaried chef, being taken across the country, put up in a hotel, and exposed to the amount of incredible food that we taste on a CREATE trip is a life-changing and career-invigorating experience. They pass the knowledge on, so even those who don't participate directly benefit. Every day, I see the results of CREATE on the serving lines in the dining hall."

While we don't have data on length of tenure, we can say that full-time vacancies have decreased over the life of the program, which should indicate a growing average tenure for our employees.

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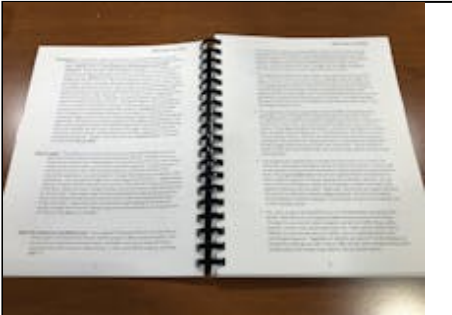
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