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# STAFF ASSEMBLY CAMPUS COMMUNICATIONS COMMITTEE



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## A. Executive Summary

The Staff Assembly Campus Communications Committee was charged with evaluating changes in communications since 2015. The intent of the 2015 report was to provide actionable items to campus leadership to improve organizational communications so that staff are more engaged, and can contribute ideas and identify issues. The intent was to also improve staff awareness of critical issues facing and decisions made by campus leaders.

The 2017 committee's efforts focused on interviewing individuals across campus with a communications role that could speak of communications changes since 2015, or new programs in progress or planned. Out of the 22 colleges, schools and administrative units, including the hospital, the committee was able to interview 18 of these units and find common patterns.

These patterns include the following:

- Limited effort on implementing the original recommendations
- General effort across all organizations to improve organizational communications
- Smaller schools and administrative units with leaders supportive of communications have been most successful with organizational communications
- Larger organizations face significant challenges and opportunities
- There are clear examples of practices done that is yielding positive results that could be used across all campus units

The committee identified several recommendations moving forward to achieve the initial intent of the 2015 report and improve communications:

- Establish expectation for campus leaders and supervisors and set improving organizational communication as a priority
- Leaders from each campus unit need to find ways to develop a relationship with their staff
- Larger organizations may need more resources and implement different mechanisms
- Consider a single campus resource that reports centrally but helps all campus units and those responsible for organizational communications

## B. Background

In 2015, five focus groups representing a broad diversity of experience, roles, and department affiliation were established to identify specific, actionable items that the campus can implement to improve communications. Two of the focus groups were specific to UC Davis Health. The campus commissioned the EA Jones Consulting Group and Sue Woods Consulting Services to provide neutral and experienced professionals to conduct the focus groups.

The 2015 Staff Assembly Campus Communications committee utilized the consultants' report and focus group meeting notes to provide a list of actionable items. This was presented to the chancellor and provost on July 31, 2015. The recommendations were:

- Require campus leaders to implement communication programs that include staff at all levels
- Establish accountability mechanisms to ensure that ideas, suggestions, and concerns are addressed in a timely manner
- Reward staff who communicate ideas, suggestions, and concerns
- Change or eliminate mechanisms and processes that hinder reporting problems and concerns
- Provide mechanisms to easily identify the most appropriate way to communicate
- Develop a true One UC Davis approach to help remove the perceptions of organizational separation between the campus and health system
- Improve "trust" in the organization by acting on changes, measuring progress, and reporting results

During the presentation, then Chancellor Linda Katehi mentioned that one of the issues she saw was there was no one person who she can direct to implement the changes and the committee added this as another actionable item from the initial 2015 recommendation but not something to ask each of the administrative unit leaders.

Staff Assembly created a new campus committee in 2017 to review the campus progress since the 2015 report and presentation.

## **C. Methodology**

Given the short, three-month time frame after the 2017 committee's formation, the committee members split the major campus units between each other, and found communications professionals to interview. This was thus focused on specific individual's views on what has happened since the 2015 report.

An effort was made to find the most appropriate individual(s) from each campus unit to interview. These individuals ranged from the actual campus unit head (e.g. vice chancellor) to individuals with a specific communications role.

Standard questions were developed specifically in reference to the 2015 recommendations to find what has been implemented. However, each committee member was free to ask follow up questions or ask for more details regarding programs implemented or planned.

Different questions were asked with regards to UC Davis Health as their culture and situation was sufficiently different from the main campus. The interview focused on the Office of the Chancellor and Provost was also slightly modified to ask about campus-wide actions rather than those specific to any campus unit.

## **D. Findings**

### **1. Limited efforts in implementing the original recommendations.**

The group in general found that most of the interviewees were not aware of the 2015 report. Only two of the senior leaders interviewed knew of the original report. This indicates a challenge of how communications at the top can trickle down to the next level of the organization. However, it was not clear if there were specific instructions to the vice chancellors or deans on how to communicate the 2015 report to their organization, and next steps.

An effort was made to address the recommendation specific to UC Davis Health in creating a “one UC Davis” approach. An office was established for the chancellor and provost so they could be more available to staff in Sacramento. In addition, a Breakfast with the Chancellor was also established specific to UC Davis Health staff, which was well received by staff members. This helped in addressing the divide perceived by those working in Sacramento where past leaders were less accessible.

component implemented that was not part of the recommendations but identified as an issue by Katehi was the identification of an individual to address campus communications. This was apparently a result of a conversation between Katehi and then CFO Dave Lawlor to establish a position into what is now the Finance, Operations, and Administration group dedicated to communications. However, after further research, the individual and staff that report to her are focused on operational communications to address HR, facilities, safety, and other related central campus-wide group was established for those with a communications role to share ideas, concerns, and best practices. The intent for this group is broad and covers operational communications and marketing and may not sufficiently cover organizational communications.

**2. General effort across all organizations to improve organizational communications.**

Organizations implemented programs to improve communications that align with the recommendations intent, but not directly because of the 2015 report. Campus units saw a critical need to implement programs in order to address specific problems such as organizational changes, new leadership, or specific issues within the organization.

Some new programs include rewarding staff for communicating issues and ideas (non-monetary recognition), supervisory training (identified as one obstacle to effective communications), staff meetings, newsletters, and organizational emails to improve reach.

These programs or changes were implemented by campus unit leaders (dean’s and vice chancellors) that were hired or were new to their role since the time of the original report. Others were implemented and maintained by senior administrative officers within the organization, representing an effort to keep staff informed.

While the effectiveness of certain programs is hard to determine, some communications leaders observed increased participation/engagement by staff in staff meetings and attending informal social gatherings that include the campus unit leader. The increased participation in voluntary social events helps to provide greater interaction with staff from all levels and, as one interviewee states, “humanizes” the senior leaders in the organization.

**3. Smaller schools and administrative units with leaders supportive of communications have been most successful with organizational communications.**

Smaller organizations are far more successful in implementing and maintaining communications programs. Geography and size also allow for more casual interaction between staff of varying levels. Some effective programs include setting up cross functional teams to address specific issues, such as staff retention. Staff meetings are more intimate, and it is easier for everyone to express their ideas and concerns within the time allotted for such meetings.

**4. Larger organizations face significant challenges and opportunities.**

Larger units tend to defer organizational communications to supervisors. Employees are asked to communicate ideas, concerns, and questions primarily to their immediate supervisors who can then either address or escalate the issue or idea. Similarly, communications from leadership traverse down through MSO/administrative officers and other management, down the ranks to the supervisors, and eventually to line staff. This creates an inconsistent approach depending on the specific supervisor’s priorities, workload, and training in the area of organizational communications.

One interviewee stated that mid-level managers were not aware of mechanisms for rewarding/recognizing employees, and had to be trained, speaking to the inconsistency of training for supervisors.

The geographic distribution also doesn’t allow for easy access to coworkers, and limited contact between line staff and senior campus unit leaders. For example, larger colleges with organizational communications and staff meetings tend to involve the dean’s office staff and not the entire college staff. Large administrative units have similar issues with staff

associating more with their immediate department and focusing communications and issues within that frame, creating a “silo”.

**5. There are clear examples of practices done that yield positive results that could be used across all campus units.**

There are numerous efforts that have helped improve organizational communications, leading to greater staff engagement and involvement. As mentioned earlier, a cross-functional team was developed in one group that included staff across the unit in varying experience, and levels in the organization to tackle a single, common problem. They reported findings to their campus unit leader with recommendations. Those ideas were presented to the entire staff group along with action plans. This helped cross organizational boundaries and the hierarchy to bring out ideas and issues.

Creating a “humanized” approach as a goal has helped many units with organizational communications. Informal meetings and events to bring people together and out of their offices and cubicles helped to make people more at ease in communicating. This was noted as a specific strategy by some large organizations. One mentioned the intent to make their dean more approachable by showing the dean was just like the rest of the staff and had similar interests and hobbies.

Another approach that seemed to work was the intent of “meeting them (staff) where they’re at”. This meant the dean/vice chancellor/vice provost would visit staff in their general area either in smaller group meetings or by being available in the staff’s work area to talk informally.

Staff non-monetary recognition has also worked to improve communications. These can provide excellent ideas to improve the organization or reduce cost rather than actually perform specific work or complete a project. The recognition has been done as simply as a thank you card, or in the department internal newsletter.

## **E. Recommendations**



**1. Establish expectation for campus leaders and supervisors and set improving organizational communications as a priority**

It is clear that when a senior campus leader makes an effort and sets a priority to improve communications, the overall climate and organization follows. In one case, a campus leader identified they implemented their programs because of a “toxic” environment that has since improved considerably. When a senior leader sets a priority, it is then taken as a priority from their direct reports and trickles down through the organization. Similarly, if it is not a priority for the campus leader, it would be difficult to expect it to be a priority for their staff.

**2. Leaders from each campus unit need to find ways to develop a relationship with their staff.**

An engaging and genuinely caring leader helps to bridge the gap with all staff in their unit. This means spending time at the informal events getting to know staff and sharing their more “human” elements. It also means engaging them not as a leader, but as a coworker who is working towards the same mission as the rest of their organization.

**3. Larger organizations may need more resources and implement different mechanisms to improve organizational communications.**

In our review, larger organizations appear to have fewer resources dedicated to internal organizational communications. Specialists already exist within these larger groups, but they are focused on operational communications (services) or outward focused communications to faculty, students, donors, parents, etc. (marketing). A review should be done for these larger groups to assess their unique challenges and identify the best mechanisms to dedicate resources towards improving communications. This is especially important if the leader for these large organizations wants to break down the organizational silos.

**4. Consider a single campus resource that reports centrally but helps all campus units and those responsible for organizational communications.**

While there is a committee of communicators that meets to share ideas, our committee recommends a single individual that reports centrally either to the Provost or Chancellor to serve as a resource and help guide expectations and standards on organizational communications. This can help larger organizations to identify their needs and ways to

improve communication, and can be a dedicated organizational communication expert and not solely focused on operational or marketing types of communications.