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Faculty Communications Committee Report to the Provost

July 28, 2015

Introduction

In late 2014, Russell Moore, provost at the University of Colorado Boulder, empaneled a committee to assess the need to improve communication between the administration and the faculty. The provost acted after hearing from the Boulder Faculty Assembly on this need and asked Assistant Vice Chancellor for Strategic Media Relations Bronson Hilliard to chair the committee.

The provost asked the committee to propose a way or ways to make CU-Boulder a "thought leader in faculty communications." The concern is not unique to CU-Boulder, as Inside Higher Ed reported in April 2015:

> *As colleges across the country attempt to navigate tough economic times and respond to calls to change their business models, conflicts abound. They are about not only the substance of various strategies, but about the ways administrators and faculty communicate during an era of sweeping change in how the business side of universities operate.*

The committee included the following members of the faculty: Paul Chinowsky, Chair of the Boulder Faculty Assembly and Professor of Engineering; Karen E. Ramirez, Senior Instructor, Sewall Residential Academic Program/MASP and CU Dialogues Program Co-Director; Vicki Jean Grove, Senior Instructor, Russian, Dept. of Germanic and Slavic Languages and Literatures; Cindy Hagemeier White, Associate Professor, Department of Communication, and Phoebe S.K. Young, Associate Professor, Department of History and interim director of the ASSETT program in the College of Arts and Sciences..

In addition to Chair Hilliard, the committee also included campus communication professionals Malinda Miller-Huey, Director of Media Relations and News Services; Erin Frazier, Assistant Director for Campus Communication and Engagement, and Clint Talbott, Director of Communications, College of Arts & Sciences.

The committee's roles were as follows:

Chair Hilliard developed agendas, presided over meetings and guided the committee to meet the provost's timeline and goals.

Faculty members of the committee shared their experiences with and perceptions of campus communications in their roles as faculty.

The campus communications professionals provided to the committee information about the campus' existing communication channels, how they operate, and the best practices the campus employs in communicating to faculty;

The committee met throughout spring semester, 2015, roughly every two weeks with a few exceptions toward the end of the semester. The Committee discussion considered the nature of communication on campus – specifically, faculty to faculty, faculty to senior administration, and senior administration to faculty.

The Current Communication Environment for Faculty

The committee members agreed that the discussions within the committee would be direct and candid, and that the shared goals of the committee would be to 1) arrive at an honest assessment of the environment for faculty communication on the campus and 2) arrive at a set of recommendations to improve that environment, whether or not those recommendations were about the tone and substance of the communication to and with faculty, or whether they centered in changing or adapting the technical channels for communication. The provost affirmed this goal in his visit with and charge to the committee and in fact urged the committee to carefully examine the state of communication. In his words: "Figure out the what; don't worry so much about the how. Emphasize priorities over channels."

After meetings throughout the spring semester, the committee arrived at **the following observations** about the communication environment for faculty on the CU-Boulder campus:

- The members of the committee said they receive communication from their academic departments, their colleges/schools, and from the Boulder campus and the CU System Administration. Communication from senior administration to members of the faculty happens in a "noisy" environment, and such an environment hinders effective communication on a broad range of issues;
- Members of the committee said they all read the faculty version of CU-Boulder Today, CU-Boulder's thrice-weekly campus newsletter, discussion seemed to indicate that the publication is read by faculty, but not regularly and consistently by large numbers of faculty; one faculty member said "it's more of a grab-bag of varied information, some of it interesting or helpful generally, but not vital to faculty's decision-making and work lives."
- Members of the committee acknowledged getting administrative e-mails from the campus and system administrations; one member indicated there are too many such e-mails;
- Faculty committee members agreed that they generally receive emergency information and major breaking safety news, such as when a sexual assault occurs, in a timely manner;

- Faculty on the committee agreed that news from the senior administration "doesn't get down to faculty through the layers of bureaucracy," meaning from the provost, through the deans and department chairs, to the faculty;
- The tone, substance and impact of communication from the administration are unsatisfactory for many members of the CU-Boulder faculty. The committee identified several factors that contribute to this feeling. Among them are:
    - Faculty members often receive information from the administration at or near the same time it appears in the news media, or even after it appears in the such media. One example cited was a story in the Daily Camera about the reasons for the delay in the Center for Academic Success project at the Euclid Auto-park that was not communicated to faculty internally via its communication channels such as university news releases, administrative e-mails, or CU-Boulder Today stories.
    - Faculty members therefore frequently receive the same message, in the same tone and at the same time and through multiple venues, as members of the general public.
    - The aforementioned applies to administrative emails, news releases (which are often summarized in CU-Boulder Today) and CU Boulder-Today. In each venue, the committee observed the following limitations:
        - Communication about administrative decisions tends to happen in the final stages of sometimes long-developing issues or projects.
        - Communication from the administrators to faculty members generally adopts the form of administrators' communicating *to* rather than *with* faculty members.
        - Typical administrative communications include announcing milestones and trumpeting the excellence of the university. These are important and generally valued communications, but they do not reflect the diversity of opinion at the university and do not reflect the faculty and staff's desire for communication that helps them feel more woven into the university's decision-making structure.
        - By their nature, such communications suggest an assumption that the audience is composed of outsiders who need to be sold on the value of the university. The communications therefore do not feel genuine for much of the faculty/staff audience.
    - The aforementioned underscores the fact that much administrative communication with faculty fails to address the larger, more consequential issues that affect both the large-scale directions of the institutions and the decision-making and immediate academic lives of faculty.
        - As one committee member noted, "A lot of the news tends to be what is happening this week, but faculty are interested in longer time horizons."

    - The committee noted the example of the imminent move of some faculty members and their labs to the East Campus. Faculty members on the committee expressed a desire to know more about the preparations, planning and process of such moves throughout the planning process, as opposed to hearing about it primarily as the process neared completion.
    - Members of the committee said they feel they are missing a lot of information, ranging from timely information on policy decisions and campus news/developments, to how to access basic information on campus websites. One example was a faculty member with a broken leg who spent half a day trying to track down information on disability accommodations for getting around campus and parking options;
- The nature of current administrative communication with faculty leaves some members of the faculty feeling that they are receiving a "pervasive" PR message.
    - One committee member put it this way: Administrative communiqués to the faculty tout "a mythic university, not necessarily the real place where we work."
    - The committee emphasized that, while it is not critiquing the Office of Faculty Affairs, which does communicate with faculty on issues such as tenure and promotion issues, the office's web site is more for policy explanation than for timely communication on issues of great relevance to faculty.
    - In terms of the look and feel of CU-Boulder Today, one faculty member on the committee put it this way: "things that are broadcast to a large audience don't look like targeted publications. Faculty want information that matters to them, delivered from a speaker who is recognizable and who has credibility, providing insight about something that goes beyond what I could have gotten from CUBT."

How the tone, substance, and method of communication at CU-Boulder affect the faculty

Faculty committee members were unanimous and aligned in their descriptions of the impact on them of the tone, substance and method of communication at CU-Boulder. Among their observations of its effects are:

- **Information is incomplete; faculty are confused.** Faculty feel the information they receive about news on the campus is fragmented and incomplete. Particularly, they want news about impending decisions and policy directions before decisions are made. They have a confused and partial understanding of campus goals and directions.

- **Communication is one-way; faculty desire a two-way dialogue.** Faculty feel they are being communicated to, not with. They desire dialogue, input, exchange and engagement. They want to be a part of active conversations in which they are full participants, not simply receivers of passive communication.
- **The campus style of communication makes faculty feel that they are not full partners in shaping the university's values, directions and decisions, and secondarily, limits their ability to serve as communicators of the university's value to the rest of the world.** Faculty want to shape, as partners, the general direction of the campus. They desire a style and channels of communications that facilitates this joint management of its direction, and that then empowers them to communicate its direction to one another and to the campus's key stakeholders.
- **Faculty observe that campus leaders are not always coordinated in their communication with them.** At times, the messages coming from senior leadership do not appear to be coordinated. At other times, senior leadership does not seem to be aware of how their messages are being received by the faculty.

Recommendations: New Approaches, Communication Tools and Channels

The committee recommends that the administration adopt a new approach to communication with faculty. Under this changed framework, the administration would view frequent, thorough and inclusive communication as integral processes of the university. Such communication would be part of the collaborative process itself, not an "extra" obligation but rather rooted in and tied to the mission, ideals and success of the university.

What follows is a discussion of steps the university could take to pursue this goal.

- **The committee recommends that the administration set up a single web site** that aggregates communications from a wide range of sources, including *CU-Boulder Today*, college, and departmental-unit web sites and newsletters. Ideas put forward by the committee for the features of such a web site include:
    - **A "need-to-know section**." This would summarize important deadlines, items of business, timely processes, and procedures that faculty are interested in. This would include basic agendas, hand-outs, presentations, minutes that could be downloaded as PDFs.
    - **Reports on deans/chairs/directors meetings**. Also with supplementary materials, hand-outs, included if possible.
    - **Business of the campus** before, or as, it happens.
    - **A how-campus-works series** of links/stories.
    - **Mechanisms for faculty and departments to produce and disseminate news** about themselves.

- **More communications about long-range issues** such as the climate of higher education and our institution
- **News about higher-education trends**, the climate nationally and CU-Boulder's place in it.
- **Features on the future of higher education,** which might address questions such as how CU-Boulder is planning for the future.
- **Assessments of the climate for governmental relations** and national funding sources.
- **Legislative updates**.
- **A feedback mechanism**, but not a comment-driven forum.

Such a communications medium would reflect an understanding that more open, two-way communication is a better way of formulating policy than a management team closed off from faculty input, and then informing faculty stakeholders after decisions are made. Optimally, the administration's "voice" in its faculty communications would be genuine, forthright, open, effective and inviting stakeholder investment and involvement.

Transforming communication in these ways would necessitate an ongoing commitment to hearing concerns and engaging in feedback; this committee's recommendations cannot be the stopping point. If the challenges identified here are to be effectively addressed, the administration will need to create structures for permanent communication improvement and progress.

- **Such a transformation would also necessitate an investment into communications technologies and processes**. For example, an initiative such as this could require an investment in content-aggregation software, so that news and events from across campus could be viewed in a single location.
- **Additionally, such an initiative would very likely require an investment of staff time**. It is quite possible that to effect the changes suggested here, additional resources would be allocated for personnel to develop and maintain the news site, and for writing, editing and updating content.

The committee wishes to emphasize that when the administration communicates with faculty, administrators should be mindful of their tone. Among the observations made by faculty members about the tone of communications, and further suggestions on improving communications, were the following:

- **"Tell us what's going on**. Don't condescend or unnecessarily pat us on the back."
- **Avoid messages such as: "Do more with less," "Try harder" or "Work smarter."** The faculty knows the state of resources at the university and does not need to be reminded of it.

- **When things go awry and when administrative error is a contributing factor, the committee recommends that the administration "own" such errors**, i.e., acknowledge mistakes while outlining the steps being taken to get back on course;
- **The committee discussed (but did not reach a resolution on) the issue of how best to inform faculty members about "sensitive" and "explosive" issues**. If there is a shift toward having a "more as-things-happen approach" to communications, it becomes difficult to know how to communicate about controversial and sensitive matters -- many of which can involve confidential, personnel-related issues. On this matter, the committee recognizes the host of issues—including those affecting external relations or having legal implications—and believes this issue merits further discussion;
- **Also mentioned were the interactive "coffees" and outreach by senior administrators** in events such as the chancellor's State of the Campus address and the Spring Townhall meeting, which in 2015 featured an interactive dialogue among key administrators with members of the audience and campus community. These examples which were generally viewed as good ways to achieve two-way dialogue and to familiarize the faculty with key administrators;
- **There was a general consensus that the Faculty Affairs web site could play a more dynamic role** in facilitating communication with and providing information to faculty, other than simply being a site that explains policies relevant to faculty;
- **The proposal was put forth to conduct a month-long audit of communications to faculty from both the CU system and campus**, with an eye toward identifying what content within these communications is actually of interest to faculty;
- **The proposal was put forth to conduct a survey of faculty on the communications they receive as a follow-up to last year's benchmark survey**, and to conduct this survey at regular intervals sufficient to gauge progress and find areas where communication between faculty and the administration can be improved;
- **The proposal was made to create an RSS Feed link on the proposed faculty news web site and other university web sites** so that faculty receive updates of new information affecting them .
- **Several proposals were made to improve CU-Boulder Today –** more informative stories on important campus procedures and feature stories on campus offices that faculty need to know about, and to eliminate the volume of sharing on events and activities like "yoga" and "bring your dog to work day." In general, the faculty want CUBT to be direct and relevant and to fill in the information on themes like long-term change and the environment for higher education, while the faculty news web site could serve as the main disseminator of breaking and updated news.

Finally, the committee expresses the hope that the administration's communications about this report and responses/actions that come from it will serve as a model the style of communication advocated here. Such communication could entail publishing a CU-Boulder Today story about the fact that the committee was convened—including the provost's charge, the fact that the committee has produced a report (perhaps with a general sense of the nature of the report) and anticipated next steps.

The committee invites the full review and response of the provost to what is recommended here, and looks forward to further exchange with him and his office on the ways to implement its recommendations, on any obstacles to implementing its recommendations, and on his recommendations for next steps.