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UCOP Communications' responses to the recommendations of the Staff Engagement Communications Work Group

As the subject matter expert unit on employee communications, UCOP Internal Communications has been asked to assess the appropriateness and feasibility of the Staff Engagement Communications Work Group's four recommendations submitted in January 2014.

Before responding to the work group's recommendations, we want to offer a few comments about some of the communications-related survey findings themselves:

First, it's important to keep in mind that only about 20% (362) of OP employees responded to the survey. Although these employees' experiences and attitudes are informative, the views of the relatively small survey population may not reflect those of most OP staff.

Second, we are pleased that a full two thirds (66%) of respondents feel that UCOP does an excellent job keeping them informed about matters that affect them. The UCOP Internal Communications team works hard to provide OP colleagues with timely information and keep them apprised of important university matters, using a variety of communications vehicles: the Link e-newsletter, print fliers in Oakland buildings and town halls, brown bags and other in-person events. Although we do not believe that the survey results pertain only to what we do, we assume that some of our work is included in the attitudes reflected in the survey. Additionally, even though we think 66% is a strong number, our goal is for even more OP colleagues to feel well informed about and connected to what's going at OP.

Third, it is curious to us that only 37% of respondents believe UCOP has done a good job managing communications related to organizational change, since a majority (66%) of respondents feels OP does a good job of keeping them informed generally, and given the robust communications campaigns we have employed regarding change initiatives. One possible explanation for this difference is that some staff may not be engaging with this type of information regularly or sufficiently. Another possibility is that staff may not be getting enough information about organizational changes through departmental channels (e.g., directly from their manager) – something the survey findings allude to. Another possibility is that this finding is less about communications per se, and more about the impacts of organizational changes themselves. We note that 45% of respondents are not satisfied with their degree of involvement in decisions that affect their work, and that 57% feel there is insufficient staff in their department to handle the work. Workload has been a particular issue at OP since the 2008-09 UCOP reorganization, and we wonder if workload issues are playing a role in employees' attitudes about organizational changes generally, and communications by extension. It's also noteworthy that only 30% of respondents feel organizational changes at OP have been well planned. If staff feel organizational changes have been poorly planned, then it is understandable why they might also feel the changes have not been well communicated.

There seem to be several themes running through both the OP survey findings and the work group's recommendations. We note these themes in part to help distinguish true communications issues from other matters, and as context for our responses to the work group's recommendations. We characterize these themes as follows:

- Inclusion: employees' desire to be included in and be able to provide input into organizational decisions and communications;
- Connection: employees' desire to feel connected to their colleagues and part of the UCOP community;
- Control: employees' desire to have some degree of control over organizational changes that affect their work.

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Internal Communications' responses to the recommendations

Recommendation 1: Develop a Communications Resource Group
The work group recommends establishing a volunteer "communications resource group" under the UCOP Staff Assembly to:
- provide feedback about UCOP communications;
- facilitate communication between staff at all levels of the organization; and
- serve as an optional, additional advisory resource in developing UCOP-wide communications

Communications' response: This is the work group's most significant recommendation, and we support it. We believe there is potential value in having a small group of OP staff dedicated to helping the Internal Communications team and the OP Staff Assembly improve and facilitate communication throughout UCOP. We agree that such a group should exist as part of the OP Staff Assembly and we have developed a proposal for creating this group (see attachment). Both OPSA and the Staff Engagement Communications Work Group have reviewed and support the proposal, and we are now working on an implementation plan.

Recommendation 2: Drive communication technology
Communication is multi-faceted at UCOP and includes a variety of methods to disseminate and gather information. The work group heard concerns from staff that communications did not effectively filter through all levels of the organization, that too much communication was "top-down" in nature, and that communications were delivered through a narrow spectrum of technologies that did not engage all staff as widely as possible. To address these concerns, the Work Group recommends that UCOP focus on expanding the breadth of communication technologies such as video messaging, streaming webcasts (timed so that UC staff at all locations can easily attend), and online archiving to ensure that communications reach the widest audience possible. Also, a safe and confidential system should be developed for staff to provide feedback on both the content of communications as well as the process by which it was delivered.

Communications' response:
This recommendation seems to mostly reflect the "inclusion" theme, and we appreciate the work group's recognition that a single mode of communication cannot adequately meet UCOP's communications needs. We share this view, which is why we use a variety of technologies and communications vehicles to both disseminate information to and obtain feedback from colleagues. These methods include electronic communications such as the Link newsletter, which allows readers to comment on stories; email, Web chats and the UCOP Staff Assembly website; print communications such as the fliers and posters in Oakland locations; and in-person meetings such as town halls (which are also broadcast via the Web) and brown bags. This mix of media allows for information to be disseminated to staff in a variety of ways, and also gives OP employees a multitude of feedback channels. In our view, adding more technologies/vehicles will not necessarily result in improved communications effectiveness, since staff do not seem to be maximizing existing vehicles/opportunities (e.g., very few staff using Link's commenting feature, and UCOP town halls rarely achieve full attendance). Further, expanding the number of technologies also means more expense, more support from ITS, and potentially more workload for those managing the new systems. Since one of the functions of the new communications subcommittee being established (recommendation #1) is to serve as a sounding board, it should also help address the desire for feedback opportunities. We also think the subcommittee can help raise the awareness among staff regarding the existing opportunities for providing feedback.

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Recommendation 3: Ongoing assessment
The work group recommends that regular assessment of communication effectiveness at UCOP be conducted on an ongoing basis.

Communications' response: Ongoing assessment is important to ensuring and measuring communications effectiveness, and we support this recommendation. We periodically survey the OP community through targeted surveys, Link stories and other means, and use that data to inform our communications work. For example, the recent redesign of the Link e-newsletter was driven primarily by feedback we received from readers regarding areas that needed improvement. We also see this as an area we can partner with the communications advisory subcommittee on. It's important that OP-wide surveys be done sparingly, no more frequently than every two to three years, to prevent survey fatigue.

Recommendation 4: Advance new communication tools and leverage existing ones
The work group suggests that communications training for all UCOP staff and supervisors should be a priority. UCOP Learning and Development courses such as Essentials of Communication and Influencing Without Authority are existing offerings that could be leveraged to build employee communication skills, but may not address the extent of the need for communication training. The work group recommends expansion of coursework offered at UCOP to include assertiveness training, specific communication training required for supervisors at all levels, and a communication component for staff and supervisors as part of the performance evaluation process.

Communications' response: Communications agrees that it is important for staff and supervisors to have basic communications skills and be effective communicators. As the work group points out, there are a multitude of courses and training opportunities available to all levels of UCOP staff to help build these skills. Ultimately, decisions about offering or mandating communications training, and including communications skills in performance reviews, are for UCOP leadership and HR to address and are not the responsibility of the Communications department.