

TASK FORCE REPORT & RECOMMENDATIONS

TO: Academic Senate

FROM: Senate Task Force on Communication and Engagement
Co-Chairs Rebecca Lonergan & Geoffrey Cowan
Yaniv Bar-Cohen
Devon Brooks
Zoe Corwin
Alison Dundes Renteln
Elizabeth Fife
Stephanie George
Aniko Imre
Dan Pecchenino
Marion Philadelphia
Michelle Povinelli
Ashley Uyeshiro-Simon
Rebecca Weintraub
Gabriel Zada

DATE: January 5, 2019

SUBJECT: Recommendations for Communication and Engagement Strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Having effective faculty communication and engagement is essential to enhancing the environment and campus climate at USC. In pursuit of this objective, the Academic Senate's Executive Board created a Task Force in August 2018 charged with developing a "comprehensive strategy" to encourage better communication among USC faculty, with the ultimate goal of "encouraging faculty to become more engaged in all aspects of the university—including not only academic discourse but also faculty governance." The Task Force was specifically asked to consider: "how the Academic Senate and the Faculty Councils can improve the ways they communicate information to the faculty, as well as the ways they receive input from faculty; how to provide faculty with meaningful opportunities to discuss and debate relevant issues among themselves; and how to use communication strategies to foster an active, engaged, open, inclusive, and supportive academic community at USC." The Task Force was asked to produce a report by early 2019.

The Task Force's work included four basic stages: (1) gathering information about the past communication methods used by the Senate and Faculty Councils; (2) conducting an informal survey of a limited but diverse group of faculty to determine their preferred methods of receiving information, the type of information they would like to receive, and their preferred method of providing feedback; (3) researching to determine if any particular communication

and engagement strategies have been successfully used by other universities; and (4) developing practical recommendations about how to use effective communication strategies to foster an active, engaged, open, inclusive, and supportive academic community at USC.

Having completed its work, the Task Force recommends that all leaders at USC—including the Senate and the Faculty Councils—must prioritize communicating with faculty in a way that is open, honest and timely, even when it means revealing information that may be uncomfortable to discuss. The members of the Task Force agree that when an organization has an open, honest, and effective internal communication strategy, it will naturally lead to increased engagement of the organization’s members. As reflected in the studies discussed below, that opinion is shared by most communication experts. The Task Force further recognizes that any effective communication and engagement strategy must take into account four key principles:

- Effective communication is a two-way process, which means that every member of the community must take individual responsibility for communicating better.
- An organization’s leaders must strive to openly and honestly provide the organization’s members with timely and accurate information to enable them to participate in a meaningful way in discussions about issues that affect them.
- The organization’s members must also be provided with easily accessible channels for feedback and the organization’s leaders must listen carefully to that feedback.
- An effective communication strategy must employ a variety of in-person and electronic communication methods.

More specific recommendations about how to achieve those four overarching goals are discussed in the last section of this report. However, at the outset, it should be noted that the Senate has already begun implementing many of the Task Force’s recommendations, including (1) sending more emails directly to all faculty telling them about important developments at the university; (2) adding video-conferencing capabilities for all Senate meetings; (3) having the Senate President personally inviting all faculty to attend recent open Senate meetings where important policy and personnel changes were discussed; (4) emailing a concise summary to all Senators of what was discussed at each Senate meeting so they can help inform faculty about the issues being discussed; (5) revising the Senate website to make it easier for faculty to provide feedback to the Senate; and (6) using social media platforms to send out information about events, with links to Senate reports and other informational materials. The Task Force is pleased to report that the feedback from faculty regarding these communication efforts has been universally positive. In short, the new communication and engagement strategy is already underway and appears to be making a difference.

II. BACKGROUND DATA

A. Past Communication Methods and Usage

The first stage of the Task Force's work was to gather as much historical data as possible about the Senate's past communication strategies and their effectiveness. That information is summarized below.

1. In-Person Meetings

The Senate holds two-hour, in-person meetings once a month. The meetings are open and, while anyone is allowed to attend, in the past, only the Senators from each school and the Chairs of Senate committees (who are non-voting members of the Senate) have been specifically invited to attend. At those meetings, the Senate discusses issues relating to faculty governance, major policies and programs initiated by the administration, and other things of interest to faculty.

In the past, faculty who were not members of the Senate had three different ways of learning about what occurred at Senate meetings. First, the meetings were open to the public so faculty could attend them, but the agendas were not always available in advance of the meeting, so it was difficult for individual faculty to know what meetings they might be interested in attending. Second, the meeting minutes were posted on the Senate website, but that was often delayed a month, until after the minutes were approved at the next meeting. Third, Senators were informally asked to let the faculty at their schools know what transpired at Senate meetings, but we are informed and believe that did not consistently occur.

2. Electronic Communication Methods

Over the last several years, the Senate has used four different electronic communication methods: emails, an electronic newsletter, a website, and social media posts. The current Secretary General of the Senate gathered analytical data regarding the use of each method. A more complete analytical report can be found in Attachment A (Digital Communication Report). Some of its key findings are described below.

a. Emails

Analytical data tracking how many of the Senate's general emails were read by faculty was not readily available because the email system used by the Senate does not allow easy tracking.

b. Newsletter

Over the last few years, the Senate has emailed a newsletter to faculty three or four times a year. The emails were sent using MailChimp, which allows analytics. The analytics for last year's newsletters show that newsletters were sent in October 2017, March 2018, and May 2018 to approximately 7100-7200 faculty. The analytics show that the emails containing the newsletters were opened by faculty at an average rate of 23%, and had a "click-through" rate of 14% (meaning some part

of the newsletter was opened). The two articles that had the highest open rates were an article about Teaching 2030 and the Senate President's blog, both of which were in the October 2017 newsletter.

c. Website

The structure and layout of the Senate's website (<http://academicsenate.usc.edu>) has been updated several times over the last few years. Currently, on its homepage, it includes links to general information about the Senate, lists of all current and past Senators, meeting agendas and minutes, information about Senate committees, links to past newsletters, and links to the Senate Constitution, bylaws and other relevant documents. The analytics show that the home page was the most frequently opened page, with slightly over 3,000 annual page views in both 2017 and 2018. The next most frequently viewed page was the Committees' page, which had between 2,100 and 2,600 views each year. Interestingly, the analytics for the website show an increased use of the website around the same time each Senate newsletter was issued.

d. Social Media

The Senate also has Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts, which were opened in 2016, but have only a limited number of followers and have not been used much in the past.

B. Informal Survey

The task force members generally were chosen because they were actively involved in shared governance or have expertise in communication-related fields, including public relations, writing, and journalism. As a group, the task force members agreed upon a number of preferences concerning communication methods and content, but we also realized that our preferences likely were not representative of all faculty. Accordingly, we decided to informally survey other faculty who are not actively involved in governance at USC to determine their communication preferences.

Each task force member was asked to informally survey approximately ten faculty members to ask them three basic questions: (1) what method of communication they would prefer the Senate to use to communicate with them; (2) what kinds of information they would like to receive from the Senate; and (3) what method they would prefer to use to provide feedback to the Senate. A total of approximately 100 faculty from all tracks (i.e. tenured; tenure-track; and Research, Teaching, Practical & Clinical) were surveyed. The respondents included fulltime and part-time faculty from thirteen schools, including Dornsife College, Gould School of Law, Keck School of Medicine, Marshall School of Business, Rossier School of Education, Dworak-Peck School of Social Work, Viterbi School of Engineering, Sol Price School of Public Policy, Annenberg School of Communications, School of Cinematic Arts, Children's Hospital LA, and the Chan Division of Occupational Therapy at the Ostrow School of Dentistry. Generally, the respondents had no prior significant involvement in faculty governance. Their responses are summarized briefly below and in more detail in Attachment B to this report.

1. Preferred Method to Receive Communications

The vast majority of faculty who were surveyed stated that they prefer to receive information from the Senate (and the administration) by email. In the qualitative survey comments, opinions differed as to how often the respondents wanted to receive emails, with some faculty preferring only a few emails per year, while others commented that the Senate should send out emails whenever important events occur. Quite a few respondents commented that they did not believe that the Senate's past emails had been effective for a variety of reasons, including that: (1) they get too many emails and do not know how to identify which are important; and (2) the emails were too long and formal in tone.

Respondents also commented that they wished the Senate would improve its website by making it a more comprehensive, centralized source of information. Many respondents also stated that they would like it if the website was more easily searchable.

A significant number of respondents also said that they think that the Senate could improve its in-person communication by: (1) providing all Senators with training so that they understand what information they are supposed to convey to the faculty of their respective schools; (2) holding more open "townhall" style meetings; (3) making Senate leaders more accessible by holding "meet and greet" sessions at the beginning of each year, doing "listening tours" during the school year, and holding "office hours" when faculty could meet in person with them.

2. Preferred Content

Although they phrased it in a variety of ways, the majority of the survey respondents said that they want to receive information about any significant policy, programmatic, or personnel changes that will affect them. Many respondents asked for "more transparency" from the administration about things like budgets and salaries, as well as problems. In addition, a number of respondents commented that they do not understand what the Senate does or how faculty governance is organized at USC, and they would like the Senate to be better at providing them with that information. A few respondents identified other specific substantive areas of interest, including budgets, salaries, hiring, admissions, diversity issues, misconduct investigations, and shared governance issues.

3. Preferred Method of Providing Feedback

The majority of respondents said that their preferred method of providing the Senate with feedback would also be by email. A few respondents also mentioned the possibility of using online forums, Senate meetings, and townhall-style meetings as alternative ways of providing feedback.

C. Research Regarding Effective Communication Strategies and Practices

1. Effective Communication Strategies for Universities

Unfortunately, there is very little information available regarding effective communication strategies that have been used by other universities. As one article in *The*

*Guardian*¹ noted “[i]nternal communications is an underdeveloped function at most universities.” The article included a panel discussion with communication experts who discussed how universities could create more effective internal communication strategies. The statements made by this panel of experts are consistent with the opinions expressed by the members of the Task Force.

In particular, the members of the panel opined that if a university were to have effective internal communication strategies, it would be much more likely to demonstrate high levels of employee engagement, just as businesses with effective communication strategies have reported having four times more employee engagement than those without effective communication. However, at larger universities “information overload” becomes a danger, so large universities must mitigate that danger by doing things to limit the number of communications that users receive by: (1) allowing users to filter what content they receive (e.g. allowing them to opt out of certain communications and personalizing the communications that are sent to different subgroups); and (2) “stacking” promoted content on websites (i.e. having a newsfeed where new messages are periodically added and the new messages push down older ones). Overall, the panel recommended that, to be effective, the content of communications must be personalized and relevant to the receiving audience.

The members of the Task Force reached essentially the same conclusions during our discussions: (1) if we can provide faculty with open, honest and timely communication, it will naturally lead to better faculty engagement; (2) an effective communication strategy must recognize the tension between keeping faculty fully informed of important developments at the university, while also avoiding information overload; and (3) an effective communication strategy must focus on providing faculty with personalized information that is relevant to and of interest to them.

2. Effective Communication Strategies for Businesses

Although no research studies appear to have been done concerning effective communication strategies at universities, more research has been done concerning effective communication strategies for businesses in general. For example, materials created by the financial firm Deloitte US² listed nine steps needed to create an “effective communications program,” for businesses, including: (1) determine the organization’s priorities and create a communication strategy for each priority; (2) identify the audience that you want to receive communications about each priority; (3) determine the purpose of each communication before sending it; (4) determine which messages are critical and the best timing for them; (5) think strategically about how to best package each message (e.g. as a story or a factual report); (6) choose who should deliver the message; (7) choose the best communication channel(s) for the message (e.g. mixing in-person channels with electronic channels); (8) define the desired

¹ The Guardian article can be found at <http://theguardian.com/higher-education-network/blog/2012/jul/17/internal-communications-in-higher-education>.

² The Deloitte article can be found at <http://www2.deloitte.com/us/en/pages/finance/articles/cfo-insights-creating-effective-communications=program.html>.

frequency of communications about each priority; and (9) seek feedback and re-evaluate the effectiveness of your communications.

Because USC is currently experiencing a number of significant changes in leadership and, hopefully, in the campus culture, it is also useful to examine what communication strategies “change management” experts recommend for businesses going through major changes. For example, the change-management firm Prosci suggests the following “communication checklist for achieving change management”³: (1) determine the preferred sender of communications, which should usually be the “sponsor of the change,” as well as the “immediate supervisors” of any affected groups; (2) tell people why the changes are happening and the risks of not changing; (3) let recipients know how the change will help them on a personal level; (4) avoid communicating through a “project team,” as opposed to having an individual sender; (5) use face-to-face communication for difficult subjects; (6) repeat key messages five to seven times because people do not focus on the details the first time they hear things; (7) create opportunities for two-way communication; (8) prepare and educate the people who will be sending the messages; (9) use numerous channels to communicate, including “meetings, one-on-one conversations, newsletters, presentations, brainstorming workshops, lunch and learns, Intranet Q&A forums, CDs, screen saver messages, etc.”; and (10) use assessment tools afterwards to identify if you have communicated effectively.

3. Effective Emails

Because the informal survey indicated that most USC faculty prefer to receive information from the Senate by email, it is useful to examine the research about writing effective emails.⁴ Overall, most communication experts, including the members of our Task Force, agree that effective emails must comply with a number of general guidelines, which can be summarized as follows. First, the email’s subject line should specifically and concisely identify the main topic of the email. As one study concluded, subject lines that are approximately six to ten words have the highest open rates.⁵

Second, emails should be sent from someone who is known to the readers and who is responsible for the information being announced. Studies have shown that 64% of readers decide whether to read an email depending upon who it is from.⁶

³ See <http://www.prosci.com/resource/articles/change-management-communication-checklist>.

⁴ Some of the articles that the task force reviewed include Getting People to Read and Act on Your Messages: <https://www.mindtools.com/CommSkill/EmailCommunication.htm>; Ten Old New Rules for Business Emails: <https://smallbiztrends.com/2011/01/3-simple-rules-for-better-business-emails.html>; The Three Key Elements of Irresistible Email Subject Lines: <https://www.copyblogger.com/email-subject-lines/>; A Young Attorney’s most important writing: Emails: <https://abaforlawstudents.com/2017/09/14/young-attorneys-important-writing-emails/>; How People Actually Read Your Emails (A Scientifically-Backed Guide): <https://resources.sigstr.com/blog/how-people-actually-read-your-emails-a-scientifically-backed-guide>

⁵ <https://marketingland.com/study-email-marketing-subject-lines-6-10-words-deliver-highest-open-rates-75272>

⁶ https://blog.hubspot.com/blog/tabid/6307/bid/33901/The-Ultimate-List-of-2012-Email-Marketing-Stats.aspx?__hstc=101001310.aca2db488aafe7294c49b24be4afda7f.1546022415066.1546022415066.1546022415066.1&__hssc=101001310.1.1546022415067&__hsfp=2584898834.

Third, emails must be as short as reasonably possible, listing only the key points. As one article stated, “think short, punchy, and to the point.”⁷ Also, emails should have “white space,” not long dense paragraphs. That means using headings, numbering, bullet points, and other techniques to make the email content easier to “scan.”

Fourth, emails should generally have only one main topic. Research shows that a series of emails that are broken up into single-topics have higher read rates than long emails with multiple topics. If the sender wants readers to take any actions, those actions must be clearly identified and highlighted to avoid getting either no response, or general, unhelpful responses.

Fifth, long email threads should be avoided because they are difficult to read and present serious risks, including that a recipient will mistakenly send confidential information to unintended recipients. It is better to periodically begin a new thread, summarizing the past discussion as needed for new readers.

Finally, an email’s tone must always be factual and professional, never sarcastic or argumentative. Emails can be forwarded to unintended recipients, so they must always be written in a manner that would be appropriate for public dissemination.

4. Effective Websites

As recognized by the University of Oxford UK, creating an effective website at a university is always a “work in progress” and involves four basic steps.⁸ The first step in creating an effective website is identifying your primary audience and understanding what they want to know. One way to determine what your audience wants to know is to examine the search logs—what has your audience searched for on your website in the past? Web designers should remember that searches will only work if the terminology on the website matches the terminology commonly used by the audience.

Second, effective websites should have a visually appealing design and use high quality graphics, including photograph, flowcharts, and illustrations, to help the audience quickly and easily understand the content. Videos can also be an effective way of interactively communicating depending upon the topic being discussed.

Third, the content should be short, authoritative, accurate, current, complete, and written “in plain English.” It is undisputed that people “skim” webpages, so they must be written accordingly. Use short paragraphs and “concise bullet points.” Contact information should generally be on the right side of the first page. Links to more detailed information should generally follow the text, not be in the middle where it will be distracting.

⁷ Six Ways to Get Your Emails Read: <https://www.themuse.com/advice/6-ways-to-get-your-emails-read>.

⁸ The content for the discussion below comes from articles produced by the University of Oxford (<https://www.ox.ac.uk/public-affairs/making-effective-websites?wssl=1#>), the University of Washington (<http://depts.washington.edu/trio/trioquest/resources/web/assess.php>), and Dalhousie University (https://cdn.dal.ca/content/dam/dalhousie/pdf/library/CoreSkills/6_Criteria_for_Websites.pdf).

Fourth, the website must be easily accessible for all people regardless of their hardware, software, location, or ability. Guidance on creating accessible websites can be found through the World Wide Web Consortium's (W3C) Web Accessibility Initiative.⁹

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Guiding Principles: Open, Honest, & Timely Communication is Essential

The bedrock of any effective organizational communication strategy is having the organization's leaders provide its members with open, honest and timely information. According to Article II of the Academic Senate's Constitution, the "primary purpose" of the Senate is to "contribute to the intellectual vitality of the University, to faculty governance, and to the faculty environment." It further states that the Senate should be "the voice of the faculty in the making of university policy and the consideration of academic issues."

To be a truly representative voice of USC's faculty, the Task Force believes that the Senate and the Faculty Councils must consistently have open, honest, and timely two-way communication with faculty, the administration, and all Senate committees and task forces. That means providing faculty with timely information about any and all significant policy, programmatic, and leadership changes at the university, and encouraging faculty to respond with open, honest, and timely feedback. The Senate must accurately convey that feedback to the administration and university leadership. Lastly, the Academic Senate should strive to ensure adequate two-way communication with its committees and task forces. That two-way communication should include informing the committee/task force chairs about any actions taken in response to any reports that they may have generated.

In keeping with those general goals and principles the Task Force has developed a number of specific, practical recommendations, which are listed below.

B. Recommendations

1. The Senate Should Use Multiple Methods to Communicate with Faculty, Including Emails and In-Person Meetings

As discussed above, the clear preference of most faculty is to receive information from the Senate by email, which makes email the obvious first-choice method of providing faculty with information. However, the Task Force believes, and most communication studies concur, that if an organization wishes to successfully communicate important information to its members, the information must be conveyed to the recipients multiple times, using both in-person and electronic methods.

⁹ The W3c can be found at <http://www.w3.org/WAI/gettingstarted/>.

The Task Force therefore recommends that the Senate use the following in-person communication methods:

- (1) continue to hold monthly in-person Senate meetings that are open to all faculty and the public;
- (2) continue to use video-conferencing programs so that remote faculty can participate in a meaningful way;
- (3) begin providing Senators with training to ensure they understand their duties and responsibilities, including their communication-related responsibilities;
- (4) continue providing all faculty, including the Senators, with “talking points” that summarize the main points discussed at each Senate meeting;
- (5) each year, hold “meet and greet” sessions with faculty councils at the beginning of each year and hold in-person “townhall” style meetings with all faculty when needed (e.g. when a crisis or other urgent issue arises); and
- (6) continue requesting the participation of members of the administration in meetings, when appropriate.

The Senate should also use a variety of electronic communication methods, including:

- (1) the Senate President should curate access to an “all faculty” email listserv so that Senate leaders can send emails directly to faculty regarding important issues;
- (2) the Senate should maintain an easily searchable website that functions as a “hub” where faculty can find information regarding policies, programs, and any other issues that affect them; and
- (3) the Senate’s Executive Board should produce a newsletter at least two times a semester to inform faculty about issues and events of interest.

2. The Senate’s Executive Board Should Curate the Frequency and Content of Communications to Prevent Information Overload, While Also Assuring Faculty Are Well Informed

In addition to recommending that important information be conveyed to an organization members in multiple ways, the Task Force also recognize that large organizations, like USC, have a danger of “information overload.” That means that a large organization’s leaders must be strategic in deciding what information to disseminate, how many times to disseminate it, and what communication methods to use.

According, the Task Force recommends that the use of the all-faculty email listserv must be carefully curated, balancing the need to provide faculty with open, honest, and timely information about significant issues, while also avoiding information overload, determining on a case-by-case basis what information is significant enough to be disseminated to faculty.

3. The Senate's Communication Strategy Should Conform with Research Concerning Successful Communication Practices

As noted above, the majority of faculty prefer to receive information from the Senate by email, but members of the Task Force also have personal experience with faculty being "unaware" of information that had been sent to them by email. Therefore, the Task Force recommends that the Senate always try to conform to the guidelines described above about writing effective emails. For example, to increase the "read rate" of Senate emails, it is recommended that its emails should be as short as possible, include specific but concise subject lines, and use highlighting techniques, such as bullet points, for ease of electronic reading. Further, to make faculty aware how to best respond and provide feedback, each email should end with information identifying how to provide feedback and to whom it should be provided.

In addition, the Senate should reassess its website to ensure that its format and content are effective. The Task Force recommends that the Senate do several things to improve its website: (1) confer with our USC's information technology experts to determine if the website can be made more easily searchable; (2) make sure the website is constantly updated so the information it provides, such as upcoming agendas for Senate meetings, is posted in a timely manner; and (3) add more simple graphics and flowcharts to help faculty understand how the university governance structure is organized and, as needed, how other relevant policies and programs operate.

4. The Senate Should Provide Senators with Electronic Means of Communicating with Each Other

Currently, the only times that Senators have an opportunity to discuss issues of concern as a group are during the monthly meetings (plus a few "emergency" meetings that have been convened to discuss urgent problems). The Task Force believes that if the Senate provides Senators with additional electronic means to discuss issues, it will encourage the Senators to be more engaged in shared governance. Therefore, the Senate should consider adding more opportunities for members of the Senate to communicate amongst themselves, possibly including (1) hosting an intranet for Senators so that they can directly communicate with each other, and (2) sponsoring online forums where Senators can discuss specific issues of concern.

5. The Senate Should Provide Video-Conferencing Access to All Senate and Senate Committee Meetings to Better Engage Faculty at Remote Locations

USC currently has multiple campuses and thousands of faculty who work at remote locations. Yet, most in-person Senate and other faculty meetings take place at the University Park campus. Obviously, it is difficult for faculty who work on other campuses or who work remotely to attend those meetings in person. Accordingly, if the Senate wishes to encourage all of the faculty be actively engaged in faculty governance, it must provide competent and easily accessible video-conferencing programs for all faculty to use. As noted above, the Senate has recently begun providing video-conferencing access to Senate meetings, using programs such

as BlueJeans and Zoom. However, the Task Force believes that video-conferencing access should also be available for Senate committee meetings.

6. The Senate Should Request and Host In-Person Meetings with USC's Leaders

As discussed above, electronic communication methods do not provide the best forum for discussing sensitive, difficult issues. Nothing can replace in-person discussions about sensitive, difficult issues. The Senate should therefore provide more opportunities for in-person discussions of issues, both on a regular basis and an “as needed” basis. More specifically, the Task Force recommends that the Senate sponsor a twice-yearly open forum where leaders from every constituency at USC—meaning administrative leaders, faculty leaders, staff leaders, and student leaders—meet to discuss issues of interest to the entire community. Those forums will hopefully provide some much needed “human interaction” where issues that affect all members of our community and our campus culture can be openly discussed and debated. The Senate should also consider sponsoring additional in-person forums and “townhall” style meetings on an “as needed” basis.

7. The Senate Should Hire a Part-Time Staff Member with Communication Expertise to Manage and Continue to Improve Its Communication Strategies

Finally, because achieving an effective communication and engagement strategy will be a long-term, ongoing process, the Task Force recommends that the Academic Senate hire a part-time staff member with expertise in communication (i.e. training in web design, graphic design, social-media messaging, and using video-conferencing to engage remote audiences). Because faculty typically serve as Senate members and officers for one to two year terms and they often do not personally have any communication expertise, they will be unable to provide the kind of consistent long-term management that is needed to create and maintain an effective communication and engagement strategy.