



Perspectives: Like Waves in a Tarpit: Academia's Internal Communications Problem

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LIKE WAVES IN A TARPIT

Academia's Internal Communications Problem

BY RICARDO AZZIZ

The single biggest problem in communication is the illusion that it has taken place.

George Bernard Shaw

Higher education in the US is facing a need for change and, in many areas, genuine transformation. Drivers of this change, which will be familiar to readers, include a decreasing high school student cohort; the increasing ethnic diversity of our population; the increasing availability and use of distance learning; globalization and cross-border demand and competition; decreasing state support; increasing emphasis on success, quality, and return-on-investment metrics; and employers' greater demand for skill- and competency-based training.

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While higher education would prefer gentle, incremental change, we often don't have that luxury. Our educational models are in many cases a full century old. I believe transformation in many sectors of higher education is overdue—and, in any case, out of our control.

A critical success variable during any period of change is communication, which must be extensive—something I have come to learn firsthand as president of Georgia Regents University (GRU). Established early in 2013 through the consolidation of two separate and disparate entities to create a single university with an aligned health system, GRU has experienced one of the more dramatic transformations within higher education.

In addition to being operationally complex, consolidations and mergers often cause an immediate and sudden loss of identity, allegiance and focus for many on campus, including faculty, students and staff. As these marriages in higher education seem destined only to accelerate, it might be useful to reflect on the communication challenges that, while endemic to academia, are magnified by transformation.

At GRU we understood the need to involve the university community in the consolidation process, ensure transparency, and provide detailed information and rationales for decisions being made. We employed a wide range of tools, including articles in printed periodicals, a presidential blog, social media, weekly email messages, a newly designed website, an intranet site, regularly scheduled town-hall and departmental meetings, periodic staff retreats, and a presidential listening tour.

Yet it continues to surprise me how challenging it is to implement effective communication in academia. At the risk of sounding hyperbolic, I liken it to trying to make waves by throwing a pebble into a tar pit.

But perhaps it shouldn't surprise me. After all, when I first joined academia as a young faculty member I just wanted to be left alone to “do my thing”—teach my students, conduct research, and care for my patients. I certainly wasn't interested in being involved in the political life of the larger

university. So I empathize with faculty and staff who may be, or wish to be, less than informed. But in transformative environments, success requires the greater team's alignment, which is driven by information.

So, why is it so hard to communicate within the university? While some barriers to effective communication are common to all large heterogeneous organizations, others are unique to academia. And although the answers vary from institution to institution, I offer a few generalities:

Higher Education Has Limited Experience With Broad-Based Communication

Historically, academia has experienced change incrementally rather than through comprehensive transformation. Combined with the segmented nature of universities (departments and colleges, laboratories and institutes, etc.), this means we simply do not have—have not needed to have—robust, broad-based, effective communication systems in place.

The Administration is Often Paternalistic in Its Approach to Communication

Many university leaders engage in a well-meaning but misguided effort to be cheerleaders and protect their faculty and staff from the potentially demoralizing effects of bad news. Their resulting communications tend to focus on the positive and downplay challenges.

However, shielding our communities from negative information squanders the opportunity to create the critical sense of urgency needed to stimulate collaborative problem solving and acceptance of change. And it reduces the credibility of the administration, making future communications even less likely to be received, believed, and acted on.

Middle Administration is Neither Fully Invested nor Trained in the Communication Process

Effective bidirectional communication between staff and administration depends largely on the communication skills and commitment of middle managers (e.g., chairs and division chiefs, unit and departmental managers, and clinical directors). Many of these busy leaders feel that communication regarding university-wide issues is the responsibility of others—the president, the provost, the dean, the vice-presidents, or the chief communications officer.

Yet mid-level managers are often in the best position to ensure effective communication about institution-level issues for two reasons. First, these individuals are closest to faculty and staff, who prefer to receive information from their immediate supervisors. Second, while changes in upper administration can bring on new proclamations of vision, strategy, and direction, most of the management structure remains essentially unchanged, and middle managers are in a key position to make change actually happen. Thus, a

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middle management that is not fully engaged in and trained for the communication process can derail any transformation efforts.

We Don’t Believe We Have Been Communicated With

Academics are generally talented and trained skeptics, striving to uncover the underlying complexity of things, even when there is none. After all, sometimes a rose is, in fact, a rose.

As a result, we often believe there must be more to what is going on: deep and covert operations to which we are not privy. And human nature, focused as it is on survival, tends to look for the negative (i.e., danger) rather than the positive in the messages we hear. Add to this many faculty’s intrinsic distrust of administration, and the result is that we often don’t trust even the communications that we do receive.

We Believe Someone Else Should Keep Us Informed

We often believe it is somebody else’s responsibility to provide us with the information we need, rather than our responsibility to stay informed. Thus when we learn something we did not know, we are surprised and bothered: “Where was the person who’s in charge of keeping me posted?” We tend not to look to the most important person in the communication process—ourselves.

At GRU, understanding why communication is so poor within academia and within our own institution has helped us develop better communication strategies. We have made great strides in some areas, while in others, processes are still being developed and tested.

They include:

Systematically Training Middle Administrators to Proactively and Effectively Deliver Key Information

For reasons explained above, we knew that middle managers were key sources of information for their employees and that we needed to provide them with the tools to inform their constituents about institution-wide priorities, challenges,

and uncertainties. One key vehicle is the newly created GRLeadership Academy, which provides training in management and leadership skills, including a significant focus on both internal and external communications.

Employing Those Same Middle Managers to Gather Feedback, Comments, and Concerns for Consideration in Future Decisions

A “cascading communications” process is under development that assigns specific responsibilities and defines communication channels between mid-level managers and their employees. One explicit management responsibility is to gather feedback from employees on upcoming issues, proposed changes, and related topics of concern. Identifying and training “administrative ambassadors” within each department—essentially rank-and-file staff—will assist middle management in doing this.

Instituting Methods for Soliciting Faculty and Staff Contributions to the Decision-Making Process

Examples include town-hall-style meetings with opportunities for people to ask questions or make suggestions, submitted anonymously ahead of time or asked during the meeting. We have other mechanisms for faculty, staff and students to submit questions or suggestions as well—e.g., an “ask the provost” opportunity on our website and an option to submit questions to our weekly on-campus newsletter, *GRReport*.

In this way, they are able not only to provide input to decisions as they are being discussed but also to raise issues for future consideration. Such faculty and staff engagement results in better choices and people who are less anxious and more supportive when changes are announced.

I’ll offer one example of successful and effective bidirectional communication in a decision-making process early

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in our 2013 consolidation. In merging the two institutions, senior administrators and academic leaders wanted to create a unified faculty. One way to do that was through standardizing the means of communication.

Faculty on one campus relied heavily on the use of a listserv, especially for internal communications among faculty, while faculty on the other did not. Administrators proposed eliminating the use of the listserv for internal communications. Faculty members who were used to that mode of communication voiced their concerns, so we conducted several meetings that included individual faculty members, faculty senate representatives, and senior leadership.

The result is an all-faculty listserv with opt-out capability. It is not used as an “official” means of communicating university business but as a tool for individual faculty to use in communicating with colleagues.

Developing Tools to Measure the Effectiveness of Communication

We are developing and implementing periodic surveys to measure the effectiveness of our communication efforts. The data gleaned will allow us to identify and gauge the degree of problems, prioritize resources, and develop targeted approaches to challenges.

Ensuring Both Uniformity of Messaging and Diversity of Communication Modalities

Messages must be clear, succinct, and easily understandable. All leadership units should be aligned on the message—and on their responsibility to deliver it.

A strategic communications plan for emerging issues can help. It might include preparing message points and distributing them to credible messengers and leaders, identifying a spokesperson to share information with the media when appropriate, and developing FAQs targeted to specific audiences. Messages should be delivered in multiple ways—e.g., the same message might be posted on the website, e-mailed, and tweeted.

Engaging Faculty and Staff to Help Determine the Optimum Modalities to Effectively Reach Them

We conducted surveys asking employees how they prefer to receive communications, then used the results to develop a mix of email, social media, video, letters, etc. One size does not fit all. In addition, we offer town hall meetings or small-group listening sessions with the president at varying times, including at night or early in the morning to ensure that interested shift employees can participate.

Assuming that One Cannot Over-Communicate

While we can overuse a modality (e.g., stuffing inboxes with repetitive and ignored emails), we cannot over-com-

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municate the message—certainly not in the transforming environment.

Understanding the “20-60-20” Rule

In any transformation, generally 20 percent of the community will readily embrace the new vision, 60 percent will take a “wait-and-see” position, and 20 percent will vehemently oppose it.

We often focus considerable effort on trying to bring the opposing 20 percent along, expending a lot of energy and losing significant traction with little to show but frustration. Better to focus resources and attention on the undecided 60 percent, while leveraging the help of the 20 percent who fully embrace the vision.

Start Communicating as Early as Possible

We should not wait for a major change or a crisis to communicate, because by then it may be too late. We should ensure that effective, robust, and diverse communication modalities are in place, leaders are trained, and staff and faculty are primed—starting now.

Greater attention and respect for the value, means, and measurement of communication will help ensure that when broad-based transformation is needed in academe (as it surely will be for many of us), the university community can respond rapidly and effectively. ☐

