

SPECIAL REPORTS

Achieving a Culture of Communication on Campus

By Richard K. Boyer | JULY 18, 2016

Over the past year, there's been no shortage of headlines covering the crises and challenges (some new, some old) that colleges and universities have to deal with. From the passionate protests of the Black Lives Matter movement to the highly politicized involvement of lawmakers to the almost daily reports of strained relations with governing boards, colleges are having to deal not only with the issues themselves but also with the crisis-management response.

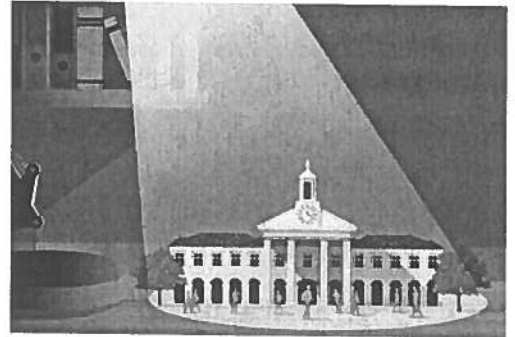
While some institutions experience a breakdown in relationships when handling these highly publicized issues, others move forward with unity. One of the key differences that contributes to how well a college moves forward is the quality of its communication, with both internal and external audiences.

It's probably not surprising, then, to see that when examining institutions that consistently rank high on the Great Colleges to Work For survey, it's clear that the quality of their communication helps create an environment in which faculty and staff members want to work. Achieving a culture of communication isn't a one-step process — it involves strategy and purposeful implementation — but it can make a significant difference for leaders, for faculty and staff members, and for students.

Great Colleges to Work For 2016

This special report examines several workplace issues where strong communication is key, including anxiety over "campus carry" laws that allow students in some states to bring guns to class and a growing faculty effort to seek new ways of demonstrating the value of scholarly work. [Read more.](#)

- [When Millennials Become Managers](#) ✓ PREMIUM
- [Under the Gun](#) ✓ PREMIUM
- [Someday, Altmetrics Will No Longer Need 'Alt'](#) ✓ PREMIUM



Communication processes take many forms, including newsletters, town-hall meetings, office hours, blogs, and tweets. These techniques can go a long way toward building positive engagement, collaboration, and productivity. To be truly effective, however, they have to do more than simply get a message across. They must foster dialogue.

At its core, a culture of communication is about using the right techniques to engage the right audience about a relevant topic at the optimal time. This strategic alliance of communication channel, audience, topic, and timing is what enables certain institutions to create environments with both appropriate transparency and authentic dialogue.

Institutions that are able to achieve a culture of communication realize multiple benefits, including:

Enhanced Faculty/Staff Engagement

Training magazine notes that the "foundation for genuine employee engagement begins with extensive and effective communication both vertically and horizontally throughout the organization." That foundation also affects employees' outlook. In response to the statement "When I offer a new idea, I believe it will be fully considered," more than 76 percent of the Great Colleges to Work For Honor Roll respondents agreed. (They chose "Strongly Agree" or "Agree.")

Greater Clarity and Alignment on Shared Governance

At their core, models of shared governance rely on various groups of people coming together to make decisions that have an impact on the whole institution. In this type of shared decision-making, it's crucial that all persons involved understand their roles.

When a college's shared-governance model is documented properly, communicated clearly, and assessed regularly, it can strengthen alignment across the institution. It's no surprise that Honor Roll institutions do exceptionally well on the survey statement "Faculty, administration, and staff are meaningfully involved in institutional planning."

Enriched Community Involvement

Colleges are increasingly being called upon for greater involvement in and contribution to their local communities and society at large. Leveraging communication channels that create dialogue with many constituent groups enables institutions to answer this call more rapidly and accurately.

Great Colleges also employ a number of strategies and approaches to foster effective communication:

Share information and solicit feedback: Among the institutions participating in the Great Colleges to Work For program, more than 84 percent of respondents indicated that their college has a newsletter, 72 percent have management office hours, and nearly 63 percent maintain some type of formal innovation or suggestion program for employees. Nearly 86 percent of respondents indicated that their institution also uses a faculty/staff survey to gain feedback, although the frequency of the surveys varies.

Define shared governance: One method to enhance understanding around shared governance is to document and/or clearly publicize governance policy. When polled, about 80 percent of Great Colleges to Work For Honor Roll respondents agreed that "the role of faculty in shared governance is clearly stated and publicized" at their institutions.

Invest in web content: Institutions can effectively use their websites to provide access to details of policies, programs, and statistics. "An effective and intuitive website, which is often the 'ultimate brand statement' for an institution, is among the most important marketing tools in higher education," according to one report on higher-education marketing. It can enhance the experience of faculty and staff members with internal-only content, as well as students and communities through external branding.

Maintain a social presence: Colleges are leveraging social media more and more. In fact, a 2016 survey of higher-education employees by the Council for Advancement and Support of Education shows that "90 percent of respondents agreed that social media is a much more important part of their communications and marketing efforts than three years ago."

Develop an emergency-communication plan: In times of crisis or unrest that require more real-time interaction, keeping the line of accessibility open using the president's voice and a planned communication strategy is often the key.

Though certainly not all-encompassing, communication techniques such as these can contribute to a culture in which faculty and staff members and students share a commitment to transparency, dialogue, and ultimately, respect. Of course, such a culture doesn't happen overnight or without effort. It's up to colleges and universities to be intentional, strategic, and authentic in their efforts to engage the many constituent groups in a spirit of partnership and service — words that are no doubt central to their missions.

Richard K. Boyer is a founding partner of ModernThink LLC, a management-consulting firm specializing in organization culture, workplace quality, and employee engagement.

This article is part of:

Great Colleges to Work For 2016

A version of this article appeared in the July 22, 2016 issue.