

Plymouth State University Internal Communications Audit

Findings and Recommendations

January 23, 2019

These findings and recommendations are based on two audit components in collaboration with the Internal Communications Audit Advisory Group:

- Six focus groups (two each for students, faculty and staff) and 12 individual interviews across many levels of the university, including the President and the Provost conducted on November 26 and December 4.
- An online (Qualtrics) survey distributed on November 26 to 6,434 current students, staff and faculty. The survey produced an encouraging sample of 523 respondents

Audit Objectives:

- Address communications and content needs across campus and departments
- Incorporate relevant best practices from other higher education institutions
- Integrate messaging and branding into internal communications framework
- Suggest improvements and steps for faculty, staff and students

We offer here recommendations under three groupings: **Channels, Content and Community.**

Key Learnings: Internal Communications Audit

Channels

- **There is a clarion call to streamline and simplify communications**, reducing the channels and steps, and providing guidance on which communication vehicle is best suited for certain kinds of information. Messages are delivered and consumed inconsistently as well. Shorter, crisper content is preferred. There is a sense that important information is not always delivered in a timely way, which may convey unintentionally a lack of transparency.
- **People are confused about where to go to find information.** They felt too many communication tools are being used by different constituencies (e.g. Yammer, Microsoft Teams, SharePoint, email, texting, Cluster Connect, myPlymouth, etc.), which creates either overload or a sense of “missing something” because it was on a platform they don’t use. Faculty will often use their own tools, adding another technology for students

and staff to learn. The result is communications are often ignored (emails not read, websites not checked, links not clicked, etc.).

Content

- **The PSU Website: A common concern across all groups and individuals.** People are confused which website to use, how to find what is sought, whether information (especially on policies and procedures) is up to date and accurate. Some said they sometimes have to use Google to find information on the PSU website. While *myPlymouth* is widely used by students, it is not used by most staff, and faculty use it only when necessary. All individuals and groups said the shortcomings of the site needs to be fixed, especially since it represents one of the first impressions for prospective students and parents.
- **PSU: An email centric community (except the students):** The survey and interviews confirm this is a campus dependent on emails as the prime communications vehicle. While not unusual, the volume of daily emails for many staff and faculty could be in the hundreds (one individual said daily emails amount to as many as 800). Inbox proliferation makes reading, responding and sorting a time-intensive ordeal. Many emails are cc:ed. Some are just not read, immediately filtered or deleted. It's a daily catch-up game for many, with some priority messages being missed or disregarded. In the meantime, students for the most part are not part of this email race, preferring to rely on text, myPlymouth or social media platforms to communicate.

Community

- **The flow of communications is seen as more from up to down,** and not across...or down to up. People feel that communications at PSU comes "from the top," with no consistent flow across the organization. Input from those most impacted by decisions is often not sought or followed as well. Depending on the leader, entire clusters can be "out of synch" with others on campus because no one person is responsible for internal communications on campus or within the clusters. The faculty and staff rely on emails, reports and other on-screen communications, but indicated some "context" and explanation would be helpful to better understand and absorb the directive from the President or Provost or other administrative leaders.
- **Face-to-face interactions are essential.** This is not happening enough, we were told, even on procedures and policies when the supervisor should be sitting down with his/her direct reports. Communications is defined as two-way, and meetings allow not only sharing of information, but more listening and an airing of questions, concerns and issues.

Key Learnings: Qualtrics Online Survey

Channels

- By an overwhelming margin, respondents said they preferred to receive information from PSU by individual email (42%) or department email (47%).
- Solid majorities rated the quality of emails from administration (62%) and email from offices/departments (60%) as good or excellent.
- Solid majorities rated the quality of *myPlymouth* announcements (59%) and campus meetings and town halls (61%) as fair or poor.

Content

- Respondents were most interested in getting information about “priorities and vision for the school” (86% very or somewhat interested) and “what’s happening on campus” (93% very or somewhat interested).
- Among those items tested, respondents were least interested in “alumni and their impact in the world” (36% not very or not at all interested) and “faculty achievements and research” (29% not very or not at all interested).
- More than one-half (58%) agree with the statement, “I trust information I receive from PSU administration.”

Community

- Just over one-half (56%) said the “sense of community” at PSU was good or excellent. The remainder said it was fair or poor.
- Less than one-half (41%) said campus morale at PSU was good or excellent. A solid majority (59%) said it was fair or poor.
- More than one-half (54%) also agree with the statement “I am not well informed of important policies impacting me.”
- Well over half (57%) disagree with the statement “Change is explained in a thorough, open and straightforward way.”

Five Most Important Takeaways -- Summary

- **Fixing the website** is critical and the need is immediate. Make this priority #1.
- **Email overload is a problem for the entire PSU campus.** New policies and procedures – combined with shifting some communications to alternate channels – should be considered to reduce the volume of emails across campus.
- Less is more – **shorter, more concise, and more personable** communications are more likely to be read.
- Increase the amount and frequency of **informal gatherings and face-to-face meetings** as a way to improve engagement, build trust, and make communications more effective.
- **Reduce the number of communications platforms** used across campus. Standardize on fewer tools and make sure users are trained.

Recommendations – Channel

- **Website shortcomings should be addressed** immediately (and can be without starting from scratch). Fix or remove inaccurate information and dead links on the website. Old content needs to be updated. Directories need to be refreshed. Navigation needs to be simpler and more intuitive.
- **Investigate ways to simplify and reduce the heavy reliance on email.** Identify 3-4 primary channels for information flow, with clear guidelines for how and when information is distributed to large groups. Standardize on which communications channels are used for specific purposes and audiences.
- **Consider alternatives for students.** Students told us *myPlymouth* is one of the most effective ways to reach them with important updates since they use it daily. Leverage this platform more extensively for important announcements effecting the student population, incorporating pop-up screens upon log-in; consistently updating the announcements section, etc.
- **Give event announcements a centralized place to exist outside of email.** Create (and promote) a campus-wide calendar that people can easily find, and is easily updated by any approved user.
- **When new technology is rolled out, training end users is essential for the platform to be utilized and succeed.** Utilize videos and webinars as channels for communications training. There is a learning curve for many users new to a technology.

Recommendations: Content

- **Review present content being shared**, putting more attention on campus happenings, priorities, and vision for the university.
- **Many priority messages are not read due to email overload.** Standardize on a methodology of identifying priority content to make sure it is received and read. Determine the communications that PSU deems critical. Designate a person of authority to serve as an "elevated sender;" and help students learn to recognize which messages are critical.
- **Content should be easier to consume.** Many respondents complained that written communications of all types were often unnecessarily verbose. Consider using bullet points, videos, images and even memes to deliver messages that are more concise and easy to understand.
- **Information needs to be relayed on a timely and accurate basis** so the community will be better prepared to seek clarification and advice. Too often faculty and advisors are caught unaware when issues arise.
- **Continue to use Twitter and Instagram for news-specific content**, leveraging relevant hashtags so students can filter what they're looking for. Students mostly follow the main university and sports accounts.

Recommendations – Community

- **Important communications need to be expedited**, and collaboration needs to be made more frictionless. Reduce the multiple approvals, layers and steps to move programs and initiatives forward.
- **Create a culture of action** where – following committee/subcommittee meetings and other policy-setting events – faculty and other participants clearly understand what steps need to be taken, by whom and by when. Don't over-crowd committees with too many people; involve fewer but just the right people. More importantly, involve people who can actually implement the decisions made.
- **Create more opportunities for face-to-face interactions**, casual and interactive, open with "permission" to voice concerns. Nearly half of the survey respondents said that there are too few good opportunities for their voices to be heard, even on procedures and policies.
- **Utilize non-digital opportunities such as informal gatherings** (with food or entertainment) where people can hear from campus leaders and share their views. This could include regular, intimate in-person opportunities for communicating with

administration, such as scheduled coffee with Provost or meal with the President events.

- **Consider utilizing friendly and respected third-party resources**, such as prominent alumni or board members, to serve as communications ambassadors. For example, bring in a member of the Board of Trustees to share what is happening with the University System of NH and what Plymouth means to the system. Or invite an alum to discuss how PSU positively impacted their career.
- **Revamp the way staff and faculty are informed** about policy changes impacting their job and career. More than half of those surveyed agreed with the statement “I am not well informed of important policies impacting me.”
- **Develop a directory or guidebook** where people can discover where they should turn to get the information they need. This could include a living organizational chart or visual directory. With many old offices and positions eliminated in the restructuring, people don’t know where to turn to find information they used to seek from those sources.