

University of Georgia Libraries Organizational Communication Practices

In 1996-97 the Reorganization Advisory Committee (RAC) was charged with finding ways to make communication “effective, pervasive, and timely,” to give it “context” and ensure that it “involves the sharing of a philosophy or a point of view that is essential to understanding and symbols or behaviors that support the message.”

The Committee made the following recommendations and these have been modified for accurate wording, and have been reaffirmed by the Department Heads Group as our organization’s communication practices.

COMMUNICATION AS A WEB OF INCLUSION

The Libraries’ Vision Statement affirms that “The Libraries will seek an evolutionary organizational model that pairs early awareness of future needs with the flexibility to accommodate them.” The heart and soul of this organizational philosophy is vital, meaningful, multi-directional communication. Therefore, the Libraries promote a communication environment that is completely barrier free. Information does not flow exclusively downward, but outward in all directions, whatever its source. It is the expectation that there will be interaction, input, and sharing of ideas at all levels. Sharing information is a universal responsibility. Ideas are community property, and their forum is a noisy marketplace in which everyone is an investor.

Inquiring Minds Want to Know

Our work is complex and thoroughly interdependent. Not everyone needs or wants to know everything, but the individual is the best judge and filter for what is relevant. How can we ensure a richer information diet?

- It is every staff member’s responsibility to keep informed by reading e-mail, departmental minutes, committee reports, and other documents on the LAN, GRAPEVINE, and the website. To encourage this activity, the following statement should be included in all job descriptions: Participates in library-wide communication by reading, responding to, and initiating information transmitted via GRAPEVINE, Library Update, and appropriate library-wide or departmental meetings and asking questions, seeking clarification, or initiating discussion on library issues.
- Supervisors and administrators should supply contexts for decisions. For example, what were the important issues, how was a decision reached, why was one alternative preferred over another, etc.
- Promote greater continuity and accountability in committee work by providing a structure for committee deliberations, written reports, and implementation of recommendations, extending

through the entire life of a committee from the time it is first charged to the implementation of recommendations.

- In addition to the University Librarian's "State of the Libraries Address" (<http://www.libs.uga.edu/admin/sol.html>), schedule periodic "All Staff Forums", open to all staff, that highlight both recent accomplishments and current challenges faced in the Libraries. The Staff Training and Enrichment (S.T.E.P) program of the Human Resources Department as well as other groups Libraries' faculty Professional Development and Research Group, the LSA Education Committee, as well as ad hoc committees, or departmental committees could sponsor talks which feature projects going on in library units.
- Emphasize issue and content-oriented minutes rather than bare descriptions or word-for-word narratives. The heading of the minutes should include the group name, date, and members attending. The minutes should describe each item discussed and the general issues or points raised during the meeting. If a decision is reached, the minutes should briefly outline the alternatives discussed, the actions or solutions agreed upon, the reasons behind reaching this particular decision, and the timeframe for taking action, if appropriate.
- Libraries' Groups that do not normally record minutes should share information on projects, issues, achievements, etc. by giving periodic reports on group activities via DHG, the Library Update, the Libraries' listserv GRAPEVINE, and/or discussion groups.

Inquiring Minds Want to Know NOW

Simultaneous communication is the preferred dissemination strategy; everyone should hear announcements directly from "the horse's mouth" whenever possible. Multiple interpretations of announcements are normal and inevitable, but they should follow, not filter, the original message.

- Use available technology to make announcements to everyone at the same time. GRAPEVINE has been developed for this purpose. For this to succeed fully, all staff should have ready access to electronic announcements and should be encouraged to read announcements, make comments, and ask questions.
- Reports/minutes should be made available in a timely fashion. Protocols for sharing minutes:
 - Meeting minutes should be approved and distributed via GRAPEVINE within one week of the meeting
 - Corrections can appear in the minutes of the next meeting
 - Minutes should be archived at g/ugalibs/minutes/GROUPNAME/date.doc or on the web.

Inquiring Minds Speak for Themselves

By its very nature, a hierarchical structure magnifies some voices while it mutes others. We must work hard to compensate for “organizational distortion.” Information should be sought and considered from all levels in the organization.

- Solicit agenda items from all staff for meetings of DHG, FAB, GCG, LSA, WAG, All Staff Forum -- and any other appropriate “all staff” groups.
- Distribute agendas of the DHG meetings (and any other appropriate “all staff meetings” in advance with the understanding and expectation that anyone may express an opinion or concern regarding any issue to any member of that group.

Foster communication in every direction. Although we should and do communicate most frequently with direct supervisors, all staff should be encouraged to initiate discussions, offer suggestions, raise concerns, and ask questions to any level. To evaluate this activity, it is suggested that the following statement (or one similar) be included as a duty and responsibility in every job description: “Participates in library-wide communication by reading, responding to, and initiating information transmitted via GRAPEVINE, Library Update, and appropriate library-wide or departmental meetings and by asking questions, seeking clarification, or initiating discussion on library issues.” For supervisors at all levels it is suggested that the duty and responsibility on the job description focus on fostering and encouraging communication: “Fosters communication in every direction by actively engaging in the exchange of information and encouraging this activity in supervised staff.”

- GRAPEVINE has been established for free discussion of issues by all staff.
- Broaden selection for committee membership. This will enable us to cultivate expertise rather than merely tapping it where it already exists.
- Involve staff before decisions are made and implemented. This will foster a greater sense of inclusion and ownership, and the decisions themselves will be more informed.

Inquiring Minds Take Risks

Risk-taking should be encouraged as an organizational strength, as reflected in the Libraries’ Vision Statement:

“While the Libraries face a critical need for more staff in order to offer the expanding spectrum of services made possible by technological advances, the Libraries will strive to take greater advantage of existing human resources. Creativity, initiative, and risk-taking will be encouraged, and solutions to problems and suggestions for change will be actively sought at all levels.”

No communication philosophy is perfect; each has its own weaknesses. A less participatory environment may generate sins of omission: ideas not expressed, decisions made by default, cynicism, and apathy. A more inclusive environment may produce sins of commission: hasty judgments, behavior that seems inappropriate to some, sharp differences of opinion. How we deal with our errors is at least as important as how we achieve our successes. When results fall short of expectations:

- Applaud the effort rather than criticize the result
- Work to solve the problem rather than assign the blame
- Emphasize the lessons learned rather than the goal not achieved

Submitted 2/7/97

Reaffirmed by DHG 12/13/06