

The Importance of Internal Public Relations
in a Public University
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Public-relations in a university setting is often thought of as external public-relations in which efforts are taken to pull external constituents closer to the institution. Often overlooked, however, is the importance of internal relationships.

Close relationships between internal constituents and administration are essential for successful public-relations in a large public university.

This paper will examine the importance of internal communications by looking at the role that internal relations plays in selected large public institutions. This will be accomplished by first looking at institutional advancement in general. By defining institutional advancement and its role in universities we can better understand why both external and internal public-relations programs are needed

It is also important to look at how effective and timely internal communications can enhance the public-relations effort of a university.

Examining the different kinds of internal communication tools that are available to a university will help define the scope of internal communications possibilities. An evaluation of two case studies will show different approaches to real-life internal communications challenges.

Finally this paper will present a step by step plan for starting an effective internal relations program and using it in crisis and non crisis situations.

Institutional Advancement - a definition

Public relations in universities is considered an important part of the field of institutional advancement. It has been influenced over time by growth and changes.

A. Westley Rowland, editor of *The Handbook of Institutional Advancement*, the first comprehensive publication on the advancement field, defines institutional advancement as "all activities and programs undertaken by an institution to develop understanding and support from all its constituencies in order to achieve its goals in securing such resources as students, faculty and dollars." (Preface xiii).

Institutional advancement has been a part of the university system of higher education since it arrived in the New World. In 1639, when Harvard University first began to acquire land, facilities and students, it suffered setbacks from negative public reaction to the abuse of the assistant of Harvard's Master, Nathaniel Eaton. Eaton physically punished his assistant causing an uproar among Harvard's students and supporters. Harvard was able to overcome this setback with public relations although the term public relations had not yet been coined. Harvard's supporters spoke up in the institution's defense and were able to maintain the public confidence in the institution. As a result, Harvard saw the potential in good public relations and followed up by publishing the first fund raising document written in the American colonies, "New England's First Fruits." (Richards and Sherratt, 8).

The late 1800s marked the advent of alumni organizations at the major colleges in the Eastern United States. The Morrill Act of 1862 (also known as the Land Grant Act) provided federal land to each state. The states sold the land and used the proceeds to establish schools to teach "agriculture and the mechanic arts." Universities sprang up throughout the United States in the following years. With this growth in higher education came pressing needs for additional sources of funding from both public and private sources. As each of the Land Grant universities was built, they faced public-relations challenges.

For the most part universities were shrouded in mystery and elitism for the next 100 years. "College publicity in its early years was principally a matter of projecting the name of the college into print through news stories of fraternity antics, athletic prowess, curious students, and campus oddities." (Richards, 10)

It wasn't until the 1960s that the programs of alumni, development and public-relations work began to be merged into a professional grouping. This followed a 1958 conference at The Greenbrier, a resort hotel in West Virginia, where university officials gathered to "discuss the issues facing institutional advancement." The subsequent Greenbrier report is regarded as the most significant advancement document of the decade. (Richards, 11)

The Greenbrier report explored the opportunities available to universities. It advocated uniting public-relations efforts and defining the many areas of advancement.

In 1974, the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) was formed through a merger of the American Alumni Council and the American College Public Relations Association. CASE has continued to serve as a leader in institutional advancement. (Richards, 12)

The movement to merge the disciplines involved in institutional advancement brought new opportunities and challenges to the field. It made advancement professionals realize that their focus should range beyond just alumni or just development, but should encompass public-relations, publications, periodicals, government relations and management. With these elements combined, advancement professionals need to become savvy in many journalistic techniques, including writing, editing, interviewing, and photography. Many of those entering the field of institutional advancement have some journalistic experience.

The field of institutional advancement has grown enormously over the past 25 years. As late as 1981, the University of Arizona employed only a small handful of individuals, both staff and professional, to cover all areas of advancement. As of 1996 that number had grown to more than 100 including the staff of the separate UA Foundation. The UA Foundation is contracted by the University of Arizona to provide advancement services to the University.

The growth has occurred for two reasons. At public institutions like the University of Arizona, funding from state legislatures has dramatically decreased as a percentage of the overall university budget. The University of Arizona College of Nursing, the only nursing program in Arizona offering a doctorate, received 100 percent of its funding from the Arizona State Legislature in 1957, the year of its inception. In 1996 legislative funding was 48 percent. The balance is derived from research funding and from private gifts brought to the college through the development office and the UA Foundation. Clearly institutional advancement is necessary at public institutions to make up the difference not covered by public funding.

The second reason for growth in institutional advancement is that it works. Universities are accountable to a variety of constituents and the only way to reach these constituents is through the mechanisms provided by institutional advancement.

Institutional advancement work in development and alumni relations has resulted in increased gifts to large public institutions. At the University of Arizona, institutional advancement became a focal point in the early 1980s. Total giving to the UA now exceeds 40 million dollars each year placing the UA in the top 25 percent of all public institutions in private giving.

Internal Community - a definition

One of the most important areas in the field of institutional advancement is internal communications. "An axiom of advancement is that effective internal relations are prerequisite to effective external relations." (Richards, 24).

The internal community consists of those who regularly spend time on a university campus. Faculty, staff, students and administrators are part of the internal campus community.

In Arizona, for instance, a city of 45,000 people would be considered mid-sized. With the majority of the state's population in two urban centers, Phoenix and Tucson, rural communities of 5,000 or less are often county seats and centers of communication. Yet, when 45,000 people are in a centralized unit, like the University of Arizona, its communication needs often go unheeded.

Universities are their own communities and enhancing the flow of communication within the community is crucial to its external relationships. Faculty, staff and students all play an important role in delivering messages to the external world. Whether it is word of mouth to a potential student, or a letter to a legislator, each member of a university community makes an impact on institutional communications efforts. Faculty, staff and students "communicate often and are accorded great credibility," by members of the external community. (Pullman, 39-41). This communication can shape an organization's external image.

University public-relations professionals and administrators, for the most part, attempt to form a specific and positive public image when speaking to the external community. A study by

Caillouet and Allen shows that unofficial speakers from the internal community also have specific goals when speaking for an organization. (211-227).

Caillouet and Allen interviewed internal members of the corporate community and found that, in times of crisis, employees have two reasons for communicating externally. They feel social pressure from the external community and they feel “compelled to account for an event because of a connection between them and the event’s origin, even if they personally did not cause the event.” (214)

Keeping each member of the vital internal constituency informed about the institution is important to the future of any external advancement effort. "Internal communication, by plan or by accident, has immense impact on institutional image and progress." (Richards, 25)

The impact of all the individuals who make up a campus community can be enormous. The potential votes in a united university community have implications for legislators and for local politicians.

"The institution must be understood, trusted, and appreciated in its own home and neighborhood, so to speak, before it can gain credibility and acceptance beyond its borders." (Rowland, 139)

This trust and understanding must be earned. It is not automatic and its importance is emphasized when it is not in place. "Even minor misapprehensions are greatly magnified when faculty and staff members communicate with outsiders." (Rowland, 140)

Advancement professionals often have been looked upon as an unnecessary evil. They, and their programs, have not been focused internally and many of their peers on campus do not understand advancement and public-relations.

The problem is not a lack of communication, but a lack of effective communication.

Effective institutional communication means the achievement of desired effects like gratification, information, persuasion or motivation. (Goldhaber, 9) Memorandums, faculty or staff manuals, and evaluations are disseminated on a regular basis at most universities. These are not effective forms of communication. A 1971 study by Michael Radock found that memorandums and manuals are one of the least efficient forms of communication. According to Radock three other forms of internal communication are more effective. 1. Communication that establishes morale. Internal newsletters that highlight employee accomplishments are one example of communications that establish morale. 2. Communication that enlists support for participation in specific institutional activities. 3. Communication that responds to adverse reports about the institution in a careful and credible manner. (Radock, 1971).

Increasing the quality and quantity of internal communication can make a tremendous impact on the overall public-relations effort of a university. "As Etzioni (1964) observed, 'problems created by incorrect information and by lack of information can be eliminated, or at least greatly reduced, by an increase in authentic communication.'" (Rowland, 139).

Internal constituents are most likely to need information that specifically pertains to their livelihood or education. Information about rules and procedures, classes, scholarships, in-service opportunities, curricula, or personnel matters are all highly valuable information for internal constituents. In their 1995 survey of employees at major United States and United Kingdom companies Larkin and Larkin found that employees highly desire information that is directly pertinent to their jobs. (Larkin, 12-15)

Information on building projects, hiring freezes, major events, administrative personnel changes, tuition, enrollment caps, and community partnerships also fall into these categories.

This information often is reported in the mainstream media first and formally presented to the internal constituencies after the external media makes its report.

Giving the internal community secondary information results in a "close the barn door after the horse is out" approach. An administration with this approach is communicating with the internal community after any potential damage is already done. The internal community feels disjointed and left out of the process. Internal constituents are not in a position to provide a positive message as advocates for their institution.

Internal Communications Tools

Methods of internal communication include the internal newsletter, newspaper, e-mail groups, memorandums, face-to-face communication, student-run newspapers, student-run radio or television, public television based on campus, alternative newspapers published externally but primarily for on-campus consumption, presidential (administrative) action and word of mouth.

Darrow, in the Dartnell Public-relations Handbook, points out that all internal relations vehicles are different. "Each has its strengths. Each has its limitations. And there is no such thing as an 'omnibus' vehicle for carrying all 'loads' of information." The use of each may be appropriate or effective depending on the situation but, as Darrow points out, "the key is matching the right medium with the right message."

The **internal newsletter** is used by a number of universities to provide information about subjects as varied as staff development and faculty promotions. Newsletters are popular tools but

may not be as effective as many administrators believe. Larkin and Larkin found that while 83 percent of companies use newsletters to communicate major messages, only 28 percent of the employees of those companies feel that newsletters are effective. (1995). One issue that is faced at the university level with internal newsletters is whether one periodical can meet the needs of both faculty and support staff. (Newfarmer, 623)

Non-student newspapers provide information on faculty and staff personnel changes, research issues, special events, lectures, and commentary.

E-mail groups and web pages are relatively new forms of communication. The Administrative Professional Organization (APO) at the University of Arizona, the equivalent to a faculty senate for administrative professionals at the university, provides an e-mail group for its members. The group sends meeting agendas, information on special university issues and announcements via the university network. However, faxes, e-mail and computer networking are only effective as tools if the information received is relevant. (Larkin and Larkin, 12-15).

Memorandums are sent to deans, directors and department heads and are designed to trickle down to appropriate groups.

Face-to-face communication occurs in meetings and retreats for faculty, staff, and administrative personnel and in classrooms across campus. At the University of Arizona most discourse in these methods is held in smaller groups which adhere to the college, department, unit and program structure of the university. Face-to-face communication is the best way to reach front-line employees. Front-line employees are those who are farthest from administration but closest to students. Secretarial staff are one example of front-line employees who should be

reached with face-to-face communications. Larkin and Larkin found that 90 percent of employees want information affecting their local work area face to face.

Student-run newspapers are a vital link to the internal community often overlooked by the administration as a way to disseminate information. As Rowland says, "institutional communicators tend to disregard the pervasive influence that the student-run newspaper and radio station have on campus and community relations." (145). The student-run newspaper has widespread appeal because one issue is often read several times in its campus life. Newfarmer adds that "although the quality tends to vary from year to year, the student press can be effective in communicating coming events and identifying campus issues." (624)

Public television and radio as a conduit for university relations is a double-edged sword. At universities that house public television and radio outlets, it is a relatively inexpensive method of communication which is distributed quickly. But it is also perceived by some to be an elite form of communication. Public radio and television is inappropriate for some internal messages because it is also an external form of communication

Alternative newspapers often find a home on or near college campuses. They have a small but avid readership and should not be overlooked when planning a public-relations campaign. Because of the nature of alternative newspapers it is unlikely they would be a good vehicle to put forward a university's line. On the other hand, to ignore them could be disastrous. Alternative newspaper journalists are the little fish looking for the big story. An open, and honest, line of communication with these publications is important to keep the chances for damaging stories at a minimum. They should not be overlooked when issuing press releases,

invitations to media events, and schedules of meetings (formal or informal) between the press and the administration.

Word of mouth may be the most important type of internal communication. Gossip spreads across college campuses like a wildfire. It is almost impossible to prevent this communication network. It is possible to influence it. Improving internal-communications will limit the extent to which gossip can be spread. Providing up-to-date and important information to internal constituents replaces assumption and supposition with fact.

Use of Internal Communication Tools by Institutions of Higher Learning - real life approaches and problems.

The University of Washington

The University of Washington reorganized its Office of Institutional Advancement in 1996. Robert Edie was named Vice President for University Relations. Edie had been in charge of legislative communications before his appointment to the vice presidency.

Internal communication was not a focal point at the University of Washington prior to 1996. "In the past we concentrated our efforts on a handful of legislators, local government, Seattle businesses and the Seattle press," Edie said. Under the new structure UW is "changing its thinking," he adds. This change is necessary because the state of Washington, like many other states, has experienced tightening in state spending on higher education. Term limits for state

legislators have been imposed. Term limits diminish the effectiveness of efforts focused at legislators. Legislators do not have enough time in office to be extensively educated about the university. There also has been a shift in political power from the Seattle area to eastern Washington resulting in a need for additional public-relations efforts in that area of the state, according to Edie.

"We needed to change our way of thinking," Edie said. That included taking on a more statewide and multimedia focus that involved many more people in the effort.

Edie started the change by conducting opinion polling of both external and internal constituents. The polls concluded that people want their message delivered in person, rather than by the media.

Edie needed to find diverse ways to involve "hundreds of ambassadors" even though their involvement would make it more difficult to "control the message." Edie looked at the internal constituencies as an important part of his plan. "Our communications plan has internal components," Edie said. "The plan includes a University Communications Committee made up of senior administrators, alumni, faculty, student affairs representatives, key communications faculty and development personnel."

The University of Washington's communications revision also included a retreat involving faculty, staff and student leaders to develop the plan. Later, as the university began to implement the plan, Edie formed an "internal road show" to take the changes before the university's schools and colleges. After the internal constituency was fully informed and involved in the process the university presented the revisions to the public.

Edie says that the internal community was "receptive and eager to help" with the revision process. According to Edie the faculty and staff at the university "by and large are proud to work for the University."

Edie's job has been made easier by the fact that the university administration has a good track record in working with their internal community. "We had an excellent president who just retired and we have a terrific new president. We have had no loss of confidence in our administration and no major internal fights."

During his career in legislative relations Edie saw past success with internal relations pay off for the University of Washington. "Whenever this institution has got its act together, when we are all singing off the same page, those were the years we've done our best in terms of state funding," Edie said.

The University of Arizona

Sharon Kha, assistant to the president for institutional-advancement at the University of Arizona, also believes in the importance of internal relations. "Most bad public relations is created by the internal community," Kha said. Kha believes that employees at the university understand the importance of discovering and teaching new knowledge, but that the size of the institution causes some inherent problems. "Because this organization is so large people are fighting for their own identity within the organization," Kha said. "They form their identity without acknowledging their link to the university." This individualism results in fragmented messages that "create the seeds of bad public relations," according to Kha.

Kha would like to do more in the area of internal relations but says that as the university makes the transition from written to electronic communications it lacks the infrastructure to successfully conduct internal relations. For instance, Kha's office recently compiled a fax and e-mail list of department heads. Before her office took on this duty there was no complete list at the university, she said.

One public-relations headache has already been solved by the use of electronic communications. Public records requests, which were a continual source of conflict between the university and its constituents, have been made easier by the creation of an on-line university fact book.

Both internal and external constituents request public records. These records consist of all documents created at the university except student and personnel information. Previously the only way to obtain detailed facts and figures about the University of Arizona was to go through a long written request process. Now when individuals want information about the University of Arizona they can check a policy or figure at the on-line site. "One newspaper reporter told me that the university is so much more cooperative," Kha said. These facts have always been available but now everybody has instant access to them. According to Kha this easy access has changed the perceptions of the university's willingness to give the information.

Kha also believes that web sites are "critically important" as an internal and external relations tool. The University of Arizona has a web site but, according to Kha, it is not used as a primary source of information because it is outdated.

Having instant and complete access to information could change the adversarial role between the campus community and the media, Kha says. If the campus could read the complete

reports of commission recommendations before recommendations were reported on by the external media, it would change the way the internal community views external publicity. Members of the internal community would pick up the paper and say, "now lets read what the reporter's view is on this," Kha says. Right now, she adds, the message is old by the time it reaches the internal community.

Another way the University of Arizona is focusing on internal communications is by "managing the white spaces," according to Kha. This is an attempt to empower the internal community to become better consumers of information. "There are tons of paper circulating," Kha says, "but still everyone says that there is no communication." Managing the white spaces is an attempt to fill in the space between the lines of the organizational chart. Messages don't flow only along the lines of organizational charts, Kha says, they also flow across the white spaces between those lines. By forming councils (teams or committees) whose members interact cooperatively, regardless of whom they report to, participants "end up feeling better about the campus," Kha says. These councils are not ruled by traditional lines of authority. Every member participates as an equal in the group. They represent their peers on campus in the decision-making process.

According to Kha, the only internal constituents that have not benefitted from this approach are students. Although they serve as members of most committees, their participation has "virtually no effect" on the student population. Change in university systems takes years and as a result, students who serve on committees usually graduate before the changes take place. The new student who joins the committee may not agree with past decisions. They don't feel ownership in the programs created by the committees.

One example of the confusion arising from student participation in the team structure at the University of Arizona is the case of the proposed Integrated Instructional Facility (IIF) on the UA campus. The IIF building is designed to serve as a multi functional facility for undergraduates. The campus team (committee) that consulted with UA administration included student members who supported the concept. By the time plans for the building were completed, the students on the original planning team had graduated. The new student team members felt that the proposed building should not be the university's highest priority. They spoke out publicly against the project and in favor of remodeling the aging Student Union instead.

Increasing the impact of student participation in the council process is not an easy assignment, according to Kha. One answer may be to do a better job of identifying those students who might have future impact in student governance and placing them on councils. By placing future leaders in a position to impact university planning, they might be able to see their decisions to fruition, instead of graduating before their impact on these councils is felt.

Evaluation of the Effectiveness of these Approaches -

The University of Washington's internal relations program is based on a paradigm that as many people as possible should be involved in disseminating information to the public and that the information should be disseminated in person.

This is a sound practice. Caillouet and Allen found in their 1996 study that employees can provide image-related messages to external groups which closely match those of the official spokespersons even without training. In one example, Caillouet and Allen interviewed two individuals about a crisis at their company.

The official spokesperson said, “The consequences of the act were trifling. Surely the August 9 incident is. It was. It happened. Every industry has upsets, especially in start up.”

The non-management member of the same company, when asked about the same event, said, “You are not going to be able to run perfect all the time. I mean this is the world. You’re gonna have problems in it.” The non-management employee had not been briefed by management, yet both answers touched on the same themes, the act was small and insignificant and incidents are bound to happen. (223)

Even though both answers touched on common messages, it is obvious that with some official briefing the non-management employee could have been even more effective in delivering the point. The University of Washington has recognized that potential in its employees, students and other internal sources and they are using retreats, meetings and task forces to help shape the message given to external sources by internal constituents.

The University of Arizona is also using task forces to shape its message but they are putting those task forces together in a manner which takes advantage of the power of peer pressure. In a 1994 article in IABC Communication World, David B. Freeland proposed that peer pressure is one of the best ways to get skeptical employees to buy in to a corporate message. This peer pressure is organized using contemporary communication practice or CCP. CCP is another way to use the white spaces on an organizational chart. CCP assumes that peer opinion leaders are the most effective managers of communication. According to Freeland, in large organizations, like a large public university, there are many peer leaders who represent peer groups. These groups can consist of female employees, graduate students, foreign students, minority employees, or an entire academic department. Each of these groups has natural leaders.

CCP method unites these peer leaders and gets them involved with specific processes. The result is a greater buy-in to the policies and values of management.

The University of Arizona is also using electronic communication to deliver messages to the internal constituents. Some large corporations and institutions have been reluctant to use computers as a tool for internal communications. Joseph B. Walther in his 1996 paper in Communication Research points out that some “theory and research suggest that computer-mediated messages are inappropriate and/or ineffective for exchanges in which interpersonal exchange is needed because the medium (computers) provides scant social information.” Walther’s research in that same article points out, however that computer-mediated communications (CMC) may, in some instances, be more effective as a medium for messages. Walther’s research found that people can be more receptive to messages sent through computer media because the sender’s appearance and behavior don’t influence the message.

A Model for the Development of an Effective Internal Relations Program

Both the University of Washington and the University of Arizona programs are using some forms of communication that could be effective with their internal communities. What both programs lack, however, is a total effort toward their internal constituents. Both university’s public-relations executives realize the importance of internal communications, yet it seems apparent that the daily problems which arise in their offices focus their attentions away from internal communications and toward immediate issues. They are unable to fully develop internal relations programs because they must put out daily fires. To avoid this conflict James V.

O'Connor, director of a workshop on building internal communications for corporations, suggests that internal relations become a top priority in an institution.

O'Connor has found that in the corporate world internal communications programs are often the first thing cut when making budget decisions. "Invariably employee communications are ranked below investor relations, corporate image building, manufacturing community support and other tasks." O'Connor has seen the long term effects of such policies. "Too many chief operating officers not only failed to enlist the full support of employees, but abraded them."

O'Connor's work supports one basic premise. A standing policy of open communication with internal constituents is an important part of a successful public-relations campaign.

O'Connor suggests that there are seven steps to creating an effective internal public-relations campaign. Create task forces, issue a communications policy, implement a suggestion program, strengthen employee publications, use employees in all external communications, develop communications training at all levels and properly welcome new employees.

Create Task Forces

Using peer pressure to affect media campaigns is very effective. The horizontal communication model, CCP uses the organization's natural communication processes to deliver greater believability. The CCP approach to communication can be installed in a university by:

1. Choosing an important issue.
2. Identifying peer groups critical to the success of the issue.
3. Identifying the peer opinion leaders within those groups and deciding which leaders are best for that particular issue.

4. Creating opportunities for those CCP task forces to accomplish the desired buy-in for the chosen issue.

Using task forces is a non manipulative way to draw employees closer to the goals of management.

Issue a Communications Policy

Allow the internal constituents to know that you are focusing on them as an important part of the institution and make internal relations an important part of your overall communications plan. This policy should take into account the culture of the university. An article in Personnel Journal by William J. Corbett indicates that “the shared values among employees, the heroes they create and the stories they tell all create a dynamic called corporate culture.” Corporate culture is important in the creation of a communications policy because an internal communications program that harmonizes with this culture can be an effective management tool. Universities also have a culture to themselves. Their culture is based not only on those items held dear in the corporate world but also by the type of university (public vs. private - research vs. liberal arts), the location of the university and the type of students who attend. A policy which ignores the culture of the university will be less effective in putting forward the values of the institution.

Implement a Suggestion Program

It is likely that most universities have suggestion programs at some level in the institution. What is needed is a campus-wide program that is widely promoted and rewarded.

Strengthen Employee Publications

This step should reflect a strengthening of all forms of media used to communicate internally. According to Corbett, “newsletters are your most reliable and regular method for promoting positive cultural trends.”

As part of this step all means of communication used in internal programs should be evaluated to determine effectiveness. If the vehicle is ineffective, it should be revised or replaced. A vehicle that allows for immediate communication with the entire community is essential for immediate dissemination of information. An e-mail group of faculty, staff and students and a home page area that is widely advertised and contains the latest information are good examples. Home pages should be updated at least once daily or more often during times of crisis on campus.

Darrow points out that evaluation of the vehicles should not be done by those who might be partisan. “It’s important to find out what the *recipients* think, not what the *editors* think.” Du Pont corporation did an in-depth survey of its programs and found that their corporate communications program was not meeting their employee’s needs. As a result, the company scrapped the company’s magazine and replaced it with a monthly six-page newspaper. They found that, although the employees liked the magazine, it wasn’t providing company news fast enough. Employees wanted information faster and with greater depth and the newspaper would be better equipped to handle those needs. Internal periodicals should show the connection between events, analyze their significance, and anticipate change. (Newfarmer, 623)

Use Employees in Communications

Use internal constituents in all communications disseminated to the public. One example

at the university level is to use internal constituents in public service announcements run during football halftime programs. Brochures for recruitment and employee training manuals are other good sources for using internal constituents as models.

Developing Communications Training at all Levels

In their paper on Impression Management Strategies (IMS) Caillouet and Allen found that most non-management employees denounce the media when speaking with the media. One of the non-management employees interviewed by Caillouet and Allen said “I just tell them like it is you know. I mean they ask about all the wrongdoing we’re doing, and I say, ‘Look, we’re not doing anything wrong, you know. That’s the paper. They’re gonna say what they want to say.’” If these employees received basic training in communications, they would be instructed that denouncements of media are in the worst interest of the organization.

Properly Welcome New Employees

The president should meet with each group of newly hired faculty and staff. There are several orientations a month at most universities and this takes a large commitment of time but the rewards far exceed the time needed.

Meeting with the president is one of the strongest methods of communication for both external and internal university relationships. The University of Arizona Foundation sponsors events in which key members of the university community interact with the president and the provost in small informal groups. According to Dana Wier, director of communications for the Foundation, these events are one part of a larger public-relations effort spearheaded by the public-relations committee of the UA Foundation. The effort began with an attempt to provide an open house at the Foundation. It has evolved into a larger effort that involves Foundation

board members as presenters of information to internal and external constituents. "We give the board members the basic material and they present it in their own words," Weir says.

One of the most successful attempts the UA Foundation board has made at internal communications was a luncheon with the UA Staff Advisory Council. According to Weir the staff council was eager to have the opportunity to ask questions about pressing institutional-advancement issues. It gave the council the opportunity to meet one-on-one with members of the foundation board and the president of the UA Foundation.

Opening up the lines of internal campus communication begins with the president. The president should get out of his office and into the classrooms, offices and cafeterias. The president's cooperation is perhaps the most important step in establishing open-door communication.

When establishing an internal-communications policy the key is to provide information to the internal community first, to preempt any prior publicity or announcements made in the external media. Newfarmer calls this "proactive communication." (623). Newfarmer believes that candor is the "key to maintaining credibility." (625).

For example, if a key administrator had tendered his resignation in a controversial manner the traditional public-relations reaction would be to issue a press release, or to schedule a news conference. Traditional public-relations would allow the campus community to learn of the resignation at the same time as the external community. Under the internal-emphasis, or proactive model put forward by Newfarmer, the public-relations office would first disseminate the press release through internal vehicles like e-mail, home pages, fax networks and telephone hotlines. Then the office would distribute the press release and schedule the news conference.

Newfarmer emphasizes that this is important because people tend to remember the first version they hear.

If a department head, student or secretary receives a call from the press requesting more information about the resignation, they have been briefed. They have also been empowered by receiving early information. This affects innuendo and rumor and furthers the communication of information that the Institutional Advancement Office hopes to disseminate in the community.

The campus community also needs a publication to provide more in-depth information on campus topics. When a key administrator resigns, for example, the internal community needs a place to learn further information: What did the resignation letter say? When is it effective? Who will take on those duties immediately? This level of information is normally found in back grounders given to the external press.

Internal communities also should be provided with "feature" information. A publication that can provide a question-and-answer session with the resignee, or his replacement, or with the president, about the resignation is essential to keep the internal community aware of any changes. The publication would detail future plans for the areas affected. This may be information that the external community won't necessarily need or want, but that the internal community might use in order to carry forward with their jobs or studies. If the resignee is a dean, the staff, faculty and students in the college will want to know how long the search for the new dean will take, whether the president will search for a dean with similar credentials, and who will serve on the selection committee

This example relates to non-emergency communications. Yet, the establishment of a good internal-relations program pays the most dividends when used in an atmosphere of crisis.

“Emergencies that occur on campuses around the nation each year underscore the need to develop strategies for internal communication under adverse conditions.” (Rowland, Pg. 146).

When a university faces a crisis there should be a broad-based plan in place. The plan should be prepared and practiced at all levels of the university. Darrow, in the Public-relations Handbook wrote that most crises fall into one of four categories. Actual disasters, controversial incidents, man-made crisis or continuing emergencies. Darrow states that “the best procedure is to gather what facts are available immediately and never to go beyond them until more are in hand.”

Internal constituents play an important role in crisis communication. In the case of an actual disaster it is unlikely that the public information professionals on campus learn about the situation first. It is far more likely that a member of the internal community is first on the scene. This individual has responsibility for informing the necessary authorities. Internal constituents will be interviewed by the external media through the duration of an actual disaster. If they are receiving a continual flow of information from administration, they can serve as credible representatives of the university.

When the crisis is man-made, such as a severe cut in the budget, the internal constituency is more likely to be in unrest. John Gerstner, the manager of internal communications for Deere & Company in Davenport, Iowa, wrote that the manager is key in keeping the internal community morale high. “Managers should not simply reel off numbers, but give sound, candid explanations in a way that recognizes and respects the feelings of both the affected and unaffected employees.”

Gerstner also believes that having a sound management perspective is helpful in conveying positive messages to the internal constituency during a man-made crisis.

“Management must convey a realistic and persuasive case for optimism.” In the case of public university cutbacks from state legislatures it is important that the administration show their enthusiasm for the future. Gerstner says that “good communication is the glue that can bind an organization together in its quest to be the best.”(18-21)

Long-term controversies are perhaps the toughest to handle in a public university setting. These are instances when the situation may be unresolvable to the satisfaction of everyone in the external and internal constituencies. One example in research universities is the ongoing problems with animal research issues. This problem is ongoing. How a university handles this complicated issue both internally and externally is important to the continued success of the institution.

To handle long-term problems the institution should again turn to its internal constituents. Once informed of the institution’s view of the importance of animal research they may serve as a viable resource for the public-relations effort. An additional benefit also is accrued. Because the animal rights movement is continual, informing the campus community of the institution’s values regarding animal research will also give law enforcement on campus an additional help. An informed campus will better serve as watchdogs for campus facilities and property.

Summary

Internal communication is an important part of institutional-advancement. Public-relations campaigns cannot work without an internal-communications policy in place. Internal relations consists of all efforts to relate to those who regularly spend time on a university campus -- faculty, staff, students and administrators. The numbers of internal constituents at most public universities make them a viable political force.

Effective and timely internal-communications enhance the overall public-relations effort of a university. Effectiveness of internal-communications campaigns is determined by the applicability of the information provided to the work or lives of the internal constituents. Timeliness relates to the internal community's ability to get information before the external community.

There are many kinds of internal communication tools that can be used by a university. They include internal newsletters, newspapers, e-mail groups, memorandums, face-to-face communication, student-run newspapers, radio or television, alternative newspapers, presidential action and word of mouth. Each public relation vehicle has different strengths and limitations.

Public institutions of higher learning have different approaches to internal-communications. The University of Washington is emphasizing face-to-face communication in its internal public-relations program. The University of Arizona emphasizes focus (peer) groups and electronic communications in its internal relations program.

The face-to-face model espoused by the University of Washington is a sound practice. Caillouet and Allen found that employees can provide image-related messages to external groups almost as well as internal public information specialists. The University of Arizona's task forces

enlist a form of communication called contemporary communication practice or CCP. CCP has been found to be effective because it utilizes peer opinion leaders to manage communication messages. The electronic communication used by the UA to relate to its internal constituents is more controversial. Some communication specialists feel that electronic media can be impersonal and therefore ineffective in delivering a message. Others feel that the message delivered through electronic media is clearer than that delivered personally because the sender doesn't influence the message.

James V. O'Connor has devised a seven-step plan to effective internal-communications. It enlists task forces, a communications policy, a suggestion program, a strengthening of employee publications, use of employees on video, development of communications training and proper employee indoctrination. This plan should be modified for universities by making sure that the communications policy incorporates the institution's culture. The plan should be further modified to include evaluation of all means of internal communication and by using employees in all external and internal-communications. Finally a university should modify the plan by making the president and other administrators a major part of the internal campaign.

The plan should ensure that the internal community has the most direct line to university information of all types.

Crisis communication is a special type of communication. It is one place where the internal community can play a dramatic role. Crisis communication consists of man-made crisis, emergencies and long-term crisis.

An internal-communications plan can make a dramatic difference in the overall institutional-advancement program of a university. It can empower the employees and students

of the university to become a part of the public-relations effort. Howard Ray Rowland summarized the importance of internal relations best when he wrote, “The institution must be understood, trusted and appreciated in its own home and neighborhood before it can gain credibility and acceptance beyond its borders.”

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