**Project Details**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Improving Information Distribution and Communication</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>5-Leading and Communicating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planned Project Kickoff</td>
<td>06-01-2007</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actual Completion</td>
<td>06-05-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td>COMPLETED</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updated</td>
<td>09-07-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reviewed</td>
<td>10-04-2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Created</td>
<td>11-24-2009</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Version</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**1: Project Goal**

A: This action project will address a multi-faceted information distribution problem that has a negative impact on information flow and communication on campus by making a thorough study of the expectations and beliefs vs. the realities for information flow at the University, including the nature and timeliness of information entering the shared governance system. Once potential problems are identified, strategies to address them will be formulated. If this project is successful, scores will be significantly higher on the relevant Examiner questions and information penetration can be effectively tracked and monitored to initiate timely responses to future disconnects.

**2: Reasons For Project**

A: Southeast has a strategic plan and mission statement that were developed in a collegial process. We also have an extensive framework for shared governance and bidirectional communication to ensure everyone has access to information. However, the Examiner confirmed a communication problem including failure to effectively communicate the values, mission, goals, and direction of the institution, especially distinctive strategic initiatives, as well as a consistent set of values and expectations for ethics, social responsibility, and service. This has contributed to tensions among constituencies and a sense the University is lurching from opportunity to opportunity instead of following a clear path derived through a collegial process.

**3: Organizational Areas Affected**

A: The entire university community will be affected by this project.

**4: Key Organizational Process(es)**

A: This project will directly impact planning by facilitating participation, both long term and brief activities, because more individuals will have clearer access to the issues involved and how they influence the culture and actions of the University. In addition, pathways to move information from various constituencies to those involved in planning will be more efficient and effective. Every process at the university that involves information transfer will potentially be impacted by this project since, if this project succeeds, information flow, both up and down the pathways, can be effectively tracked and monitored to initiate timely responses to future disconnects. Better information sharing will promote collegial decision making and foster a sense of shared vision and action. Numerous cases of information flow disruption, in both upward and downward directions, have been identified across campus since the initiation of the development of this action project.

**5: Project Time Frame Rationale**

A: By June 1, 2008 the web page will be redesigned to increase access to minutes from committees involved in shared governance and basic information related to decision making. The bidirectional information flow audit will be initiated. By June 1, 2009 the bidirectional information flow audit will be completed and processes to improve penetration will be developed. The web page usage study will be completed and changes to the web pages will be developed. By June 1, 2010 the second bidirectional information flow audit will be completed and results compared with the initial audit. The second web page usage study will be completed and results compared with the initial study. Additional processes to improve bidirectional information flow and web page will be developed. Responses to relevant questions from Examiner will be compared to those from 2006.
Project Success Monitoring

A: Each action project will have its own team and designated leader. The AQIP Steering Committee will provide oversight through regular communication with the team. The team will also have some members from the Steering Committee. The composition of the Steering committee makes it a strong vehicle for communicating activities with the rest of the campus. The co-chairs will assure that the administration is informed on all relevant activities, findings and plans. Some initial measurable indicators will be specific hit counts on the Web site that will indicate information is being accessed and that there is successful penetration of planted messages.

Project Outcome Measures

A: If this project is successful: scores will be significantly higher on the relevant Examiner questions in a post test; specific hit counts on the Web site will indicate information is being accessed; bidirectional information flow can be effectively tracked and monitored to initiate timely responses to future disconnects and fewer incidents of information flow disruption will be noted.

Project Update

1: Project Accomplishments and Status

A: This was the concluding year of the Improving Information Distribution and Communication Action Project. The action team completed its data-collection, looking at three initiatives following the methodology described under Question 2 below, summarized its findings, and reported its conclusions and recommendations to the AQIP Steering Committee.

Findings:
Aggregated and digested data summaries for each of the focus groups are included in the appendices. The table below summarizes the team’s findings with regard to the effectiveness of communications. Consistent answers were taken as indicators of effective communications; inconsistent answers were taken as evidence of communications problems.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Technology Village</th>
<th>Budget Review</th>
<th>Career Linkages</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What is this initiative?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did it come about?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent, but generally unknown</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How did you learn about it?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is its current status?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Who communicates progress?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How it that progress communicated? To whom?</td>
<td>Inconsistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
<td>Consistent</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1 Internal communications processes, as exemplified by the budget review process, work better than do our external and strategic communications processes. While the interviewees (some with 12 years of experience at Southeast) do not know the origins of the process, how it works, its goals, and the general flow of information are well understood. The goal of the process—developing a balanced budget—is well understood, as are the limitations inherent with that goal. Finally, there is what we call front end buy-in to the process—the process is not only trusted, but people take it seriously and information about the annual deliberations appears to break through the mass of information people get on a daily basis.

2 While there is confusion about the origins of the career linkages program (possibly a function of the external communications component) the internal communications about the initiative work well. It appears that there was a large degree of serendipity involved in the origin of the initiative as Southeast was developing its Transitions program at the same time that the Division of Workforce Development was looking to form partnerships with higher education institutions. We suspect that there were good attempts at communications concerning the development of this initiative, but they failed to break through to a level of significance early in the process. Once established as part of the institutional culture (how ever it came about) the initiative and communication about it achieved a level of significance.

3 Both external and internal communications concerning the technology village have been highly problematic. Descriptions of the nature of the initiative vary widely from person to person. Interestingly two very knowledgeable interviewees used almost exactly the same phrase—“there was some money available”—when describing the origins of the initiative. Several interviewees indicated that the sensitivity surrounding funding sources (both federal earmark money and private investment/development funds) limited the ability of parties to communicate about the initiative.

Conclusions and Recommendations:
Sorting out a communications issue from a decision-making issue or a shared governance issue is exceptionally difficult. Often complaints about poor communications appear to be disguised complaints that one’s ideas were not accepted or that one disagrees with a decision or that one feels a decision should have been made by (or at least involved) a different body. The task of the action team was to examine communications, not decision making. Still, it is impossible to address communications without addressing decision making in some degree, because certain types of decisions appear more likely than others to lead to genuine communications problems. We believe that decisions can be divided into three sorts: those that are closely held (made by a very small group) and reflect the input of the members of the deciding group, those that are closely held but reflect the input of a much larger group than the deciding group, and those that are the consensus of a large group. Within each type of decision, information conduits can be either open or closed. Two of the focus groups exemplify decision making and communication processes at the extremes of the spectrum. The technology village decision making was closely held and the information conduits were closed to the broader community. The budget review process, on the other hand, is one of consensus where the information conduits are open. That the most problematic issue studied lies at one extreme, and the best functioning at the other is suggestive. The team understands that closely held, closed communications decisions have to be made in some cases. We also note that (a) these seem to be more susceptible to communications breakdown and (b) a number of significant decisions affecting institutional directions in the past decade or so have been of this sort.

Generally speaking, our internal communications processes work better than our external and strategic communications processes. The budget review process appears to function extremely well, and it appears to be well understood across the institution. This is not to say that everyone is happy with the results of the process, but at least they understand the decisions and how they came to be. We believe that the strength of this process lies in its transparency and openness. The realm of decisions is clear, and the ownership and origin of proposals is clear. Our first recommendation, therefore, is that the budget review process be used as a model for more of the decision making processes on campus. Specifically, we believe that the strategic planning process should be a more continuous process rather than an episodic one. While strategic planning is crucial to the institution, the process comes up every few years, a new strategic plan is developed, and then the process (and even the plan) seems to disappear.

Our second recommendation is that efforts be made to clarify and communicate the type of decisions being made. If a decision is one that is closely held, that should be made clear, as should the fact that input is not being solicited. Much confusion can be avoided by this sort of clarity. Similarly, when input or consensus is sought, it is important to convey that clearly in order to increase front end buy-in to both the decision making process and the ultimate decision that results from that process, the consensus is warranted.

Our third and final recommendation is that efforts should be made to increase the horizontal flow of information within the institution. Information conduits currently appear to be vertical and even when they work well, one unit may not know what is going on in another unit (this is not a problem within the budget review process). The result is a lack of sense of institutional mission and direction. Increasing information and understanding of what diverse units are doing should increase a sense of mission.

### 2: Institution Involvement

**A:**

The methodology chosen for this project was to use focus group interviews of key parties involved with the issues. Each team asked the same set of questions in an effort to determine, inter alia, whether a consistent message gets out, what the actual channels of communications are, and how stakeholders perceive the communications processes at the University. The analytic approach chosen for this project is to produce case studies of specific issues where there are perceived internal or external communications problems. The approach is derived from Karl Llewellyn’s approach to the codification of commercial law in the Uniform Commercial Code. This approach starts with the assumption that there may be a wide divergence between statements of how things ought to be done (rules on the books) and how things are actually done (rules in action). By looking both at what is supposed to happen (rules on the books) and at what actually happens (rules in action), best practices and good rules are mutually adjusting and reinforcing. Moreover, this approach takes as a premise the view that the people closest to a specific task, those who perform it on a daily basis, often understand the realities of the job better than do their superiors who are not involved with the task on a daily basis. When crafting banking regulations, Llewellyn and other drafters of Article 2 of the Uniform Commercial Code visited major banks and interviewed bankers with a view toward gaining a businesspersons understanding of banking practices. Llewellyn was fond of asking “If I were a check and I arrived at your bank, what would happen to me?” The point of such a question was two-fold: it gave the drafters a much needed practitioners perspective of the world of banking and it allowed the drafters to shape rules that would codify the practices of the best practitioners. It would be difficult to overstate the importance that Llewellyn placed on the functional nature of commercial legal rules. The proper consumers of commercial rules are not lawyers and judges, but ordinary businesspersons. As such, good commercial rules had to be accessible to, and descriptive of the behavior of, ordinary business people. The principle needs to be served by commercial law are the needs of people doing business. The team endorses the idea that the practitioners view of processes is essential in crafting reforms, for it is the practitioners who ultimately will implement reforms and in whom hands the success or failure or reform rests.

After internal deliberations and input from the AQP Steering Committee, three (3) issues were chosen for investigation: the budget
review process, the development of the career linkages program, and the development of the technology village. These issues involve all of the major internal and external stakeholder groups for the University. Sub-committees were formed to gather data: Allen Gathman headed the sub-committee on the technology village; Warren Skinner headed the sub-committee on the career linkages program; Hamner Hill headed the sub-committee on the budget review process. A specific set of questions was developed for each sub-committee to ask of each person interviewed. A consistent set of questions allowed the team to assess the effectiveness of communication regarding both broad and narrow questions. Consistent answers were taken as an indicator of effective communications; inconsistent answers as an indicator of a communications breakdown.

Questions each team asked:
What is this initiative?
How did it come about?
How did you learn about it?
What is its current status?
Who communicates progress?
How is that progress communicated? To whom?

3: Next Steps

A: The next step is to determine how best to communicate the results of the Action Team's work to the campus and to identify specific ongoing processes to which its conclusions might be applied. The President will reference the primary conclusions of the action project in his State of the University Address in September 2010 and has discussed its conclusions at various other meetings across campus, including the first meeting of Faculty Senate in fall 2010. A new action project on governance, directed at procedures for program review and tenure and promotion, is intended to model the kind of open, inclusive decision-process that will follow the recommendations of this project for the improvement of internal communication.

4: Resulting Effective Practices

A: The Action Team identified an existing practice, namely, the budget review process, where communication is effective and suggests that this existing process be applied elsewhere, when appropriate.

5: Project Challenges

A: The primary challenge is how to relate the Action Team's findings to altering the perception of poor communication on the part of many members of the University community. The conclusions of the action project were clear in linking the mode of decision-making with the perception of better or worse communication. Not all decisions can follow the model of the budget review process, and the Action Team acknowledges this, but more processes do so than is known, and it will require constant vigilance and efforts such as the new action project on governance, to improve these perceptions.

Update Review

1: Project Accomplishments and Status

A: The team has successfully brought this project to a close and reported data that have informed future actions. The report would be easier to interpret if the response categories (consistent and inconsistent) were more clearly defined, perhaps through statistics. As the results are reported, it is difficult to see where the differences across categories are significant. The distinction made between communication, the major goal of the original project, and decision-making is an important one; however, the recommendations are primarily tied to decision-making rather than communication. It would be interesting to see how the data could inform a more robust communication process in the future.

2: Institution Involvement

A: While the use of focus groups is an excellent method for gathering data across a large group, it is unclear from this description who
3: Next Steps

A: Communicating the results of this project is important so that the focus group participants can be assured that their voices were heard and are making a difference. By including this in the President’s State of the University Address, the community can see that leadership considers this a significant project and values the involvement of the community. There are three recommendations coming from this project, and it would be interesting to hear how they will be implemented. Will there be additional discussion or are they at the operational stage? Before a new action project is undertaken, it would be important to the stakeholders to see the next steps for implementing the results from this project.

4: Resulting Effective Practices

A: The data suggest that communication for the budget review process was consistent and three recommendations are made for future initiatives around decision making and communication. It would be helpful to map out exactly how the data will inform other units and also how they will lead to effective practice which may go beyond consistency. It would be helpful for the institution to identify exactly what steps it will take to ensure best practice from the existing analysis. By doing this, it will have a process in place that will contribute to the success of a new project.

5: Project Challenges

A: It might be useful to have open institution-wide forums where this very issue is discussed. Making the distinction between communication and decision-making is important and not easily understood by many stakeholders. If the action team facilitated such a forum, it could contribute significantly to clearing up inaccurate perceptions and leading the way to greater involvement and collaboration among all affected members of the community.

Project Outcome

1: Reason for completion

A: The Action Team developed recommendations and has submitted them to the AQIP Steering Committee and Administrative Council for follow-up.

2: Success Factors

A: The Action Team provided a useful framework for understanding and responding to communication issues. It identified the Budget Review Process as a good model for institutional communication. Within this framework, Administrative Council has begun to consider how to extend this model to communication and setting of annual objectives as they related to the University’s strategic plan.

3: Unsuccessful Factors

A: Institutional response to the Action Team’s recommendations could have been more rapid.