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### Growing Distant: The Fleeting Communication of University Administration

The college experience in the United States is meant to be one of the most influential learning experiences of one's life. For students, it offers networking opportunities, chances to gain essential career skills, and ways to meet people who may become friends forever. It can prove just as fulfilling to faculty and administrators, allowing opportunities to broaden one's cultural spectrum and build the next generation toward success. However, for these accomplishments to be achieved, these bodies need to work in cohesion and be support systems for success, and in the years since the COVID pandemic, there has been a felt disconnect and hostility between administrators and both staff and student bodies. Increasingly in universities nationwide, including in the Miami Valley, the latter groups have believed the higher-ups to be more engrossed in their own interests, ignoring or berating their major concerns for university growth or safety and not communicating other university issues. As such, it becomes essential that this fleeting connection be reestablished to keep trust and reliability high in university settings. In ensuring that colleges continue to be successful career paths, connections between administrative, faculty, and student bodies must be repaired to promote everyone's best interests and goals on university grounds.

Just as one-on-one communication is necessary for relationships to be fulfilling, college administrators must be in constant dialogue with the university's other major bodies to ensure that tasks can be completed, new milestones can be reached, and problems can be swiftly taken care of. But especially in recent years, there have been many cases of university head honchos being uncommunicative or hostile when it comes to the needs of those other than themselves. One place where this has occurred in recent years is Ohio University. Since initiating mass

layoffs at the height of the pandemic, members of the college's staff and student bodies have noticed their leaders seemingly communicating less with them on important issues such as budgeting and student programs, leading to belief that the administration is more focused on putting themselves first. Associate English professor Joe McLaughlin made comments about the faculty's exclusions from talks on budget cuts, claiming that the university was sending signals that they didn't trust their faculty to be strategic or intelligent enough to make financial calls, even as the university lost money from such decisions to exclude them (Claire Schiopota, The Post). Chemistry student Lauren Brown, a member of the university's Visible Campaign dedicated to promoting diversity on campus, felt similar disdain for the administration and its treatment of the campaign, quoted saying that she was losing trust in the university to keep the program together because "I really only think the university cares about the money. I think they're gonna do whatever makes them look good" (Claire Schiopota, The Post).

Ohio University is not the only college to exclusively hold this problem. In 2023, the University of Arizona was put at an over \$200 million budget deficit because of the purchase of the neighboring Ashford University. Despite much concern among faculty of its purchase being prioritized over the building of the university's own operations, former president Robert C. Robbins continued with the decision, establishing a major disconnect that led to his resignation around a year later (Lee Gardner, The Chronicle of Higher Education). University of Oklahoma chemistry professor Donna J. Nelson was given a course start date by an administrator during the pandemic that was two weeks later than the date students were given, an issue the administration didn't take the blame for, which resulted in her missing the first class (Donna Nelson, ACS Publications). Massive budget cuts at the University of New Orleans included the cutting of 70 faculty positions, a large chunk of which previously belonged to employees who quit their

positions “after [President] Johnson required all staffers to end remote work and return to campus full-time” (Michael T. Nietzel, Forbes).

It’s no secret that this growing issue has also shown its face in the Dayton area. In March of 2025, Eric Spina, the University of Dayton’s president, released a letter stating that after two days of deliberation, the college was going to cut a total of 65 full-time employees from their roster and eliminate 20 staff positions, cutting contracts ahead of the 2025-26 academic timeline (Thomas Gnau and Eileen McClory, Dayton Daily News). For perspective, the university advertises having around 1,900 full-time employees, not including research staff, meaning this cut accounted for just under 3.5% of their full-time faculty and staff. This came after previous announcements in August of last year that the university was preparing for major budget cuts to accommodate a smaller student body, decisions which were largely out of faculty’s hands and not effectively communicated to them, especially with how short the discussions on staff cuts came to be. A couple of months earlier, UD also sent out an email relaying tips on staying safe in colder weather on a day that saw wind chills lower than 20 degrees below zero; however, the university went against the idea of cancelling campus activities despite student feedback to do otherwise and the danger the weather conditions present posed for students.

Tensions were also high over massive budget cuts at Springfield’s Wittenberg University last fall, when an announcement came stating that not only would a similar number of positions be cut as at UD, but also multiple student programs would be eliminated entirely, such as music studies and multiple language majors. Protests quickly kicked off among students and faculty over concerns about their quickly changing career paths. Music major Will Boeck commented to Springfield News that he was frustrated with having to possibly take extra finances and time to get a proper education due to the possibility of having to transfer schools, stating “I blame it on

the mismanagement of the board over all these years that led to where we are now" (Eileen McClory and Jessica Orozco, Springfield News). Wittenberg's chapter president of the American Association of University Professors, Lori Askeland, also remarked how she and others were devastated by the loss of music majors due to both their major connections to the arts and their ability to make people come together and form connections (Eileen McClory and Jessica Orozco, Springfield News). Administrative disconnect and disdain have grown immensely both in the local area and across the nation.

As internal disconnect and the lack of communication continue to grow, there are a variety of major issues that arise when these bodies aren't on the same page or don't have effective interactions with one another. For instance, large disconnects between students and administration can make students less eager to reach out to campus leaders for assistance. In an anonymous 2021 study done for the *Higher Education Studies* journal, it was found that two big implications that made students hesitate to reach out to campus leaders for assistance were previous assumptions that they would downplay, not understand, or judge the student for the problems they were dealing with and "the potential isolation of campus leaders from students, leading to a disconnect between the work of the leaders and the students' experience" (Stephanie Rizzo et al., *Higher Education Studies*). If campus leaders don't engage in effective dialogue with students or are not present to do so, then this makes them less likely to be seen as leaders, which diminishes trust within the university.

Such prolonged disconnect can also create massive tension between all bodies involved, which can quickly turn unprofessional. The effects of this tension were realized in 2022 at Bluefield State University in West Virginia, when former president Robin C. Capehart went on a lengthy social media rant berating campus faculty, claiming the staff to be unappreciative of their

given positions and complaining how they were always in a bad mood (Lee Gardner, The Chronicle of Higher Education). Concerningly, a lack of proper communication can even lead to a campus environment becoming more dangerous. In another research project dedicated to analyzing student knowledge of sexual assault or harassment policies on campus, a major cause of lacking student knowledge on these policies was the fact that the policies listed on university websites were often relayed at a reading level far higher than that of someone just entering college, making them difficult for incoming students to understand (Shannon Duncan et al., Journal of Forensic Nursing). This issue not only creates further disconnect because the policies “are written more for institutions than survivors” (Gillian Pinchevsky and Brittany Hayes, Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work)” but also limits the ability for students to effectively respond to these events when they happen; despite many students in a Spring 2017 survey claiming they knew their campus’s sexual conduct policies, a large chunk were found to have noticeable gaps in the specific knowledge they had, and therefore couldn’t effectively apply them if need be (Gillian Pinchevsky and Brittany Hayes, Journal of Evidence-Based Social Work). A regular lack of communication between students, faculty, and administrative bodies can severely impact the campus experience in various ways, from increased difficulty in recognizing effective leaders to even a lack of proper safety standards on campus grounds.

Given how much of an issue that lacking communication poses to higher education, that begs the question as to how the issue can be dealt with and satisfactory dialogue can take place again. The solution, surprisingly, would be rather simple; if communication is to be reestablished, then there needs to be arrangements and events on campus grounds where the main goal is to do such a thing. Administrations, staff bodies, and even student groups are always holding regular meetings and discussions among themselves on their individual issues,

but it seems as if talk amongst these different bodies is ever fading. Therefore, to spark up these conversations again, universities could implement regular conferences and meetings that take place among members of all three bodies simultaneously alongside those among each body individually. These would be inclusive to people such as lecturers and professors, research assistants, student government councils, deans and university chairmen, student employees, university directors and coordinators, and other student, staff, and administrative bodies. Simply put, these group meetings would allow opportunities for every campus member to have their needs, interests, or goals on campus be heard and create the potential to formulate plans or discussions amongst everyone that will best serve the entire campus's interests rather than the needs of the few.

The University of Dayton has a similar, albeit smaller, system as described, which allows for this necessary conversation to take place. Among UD's ranks exists an academic senate designed with the responsibility of discussing the campus-wide impacts of its educational policies in place, an entity made up of department deans, tenured faculty, and members of the student government. The organization's members currently hold weekly meetings amongst themselves on Friday afternoons. Occasionally, the senate grants opportunities for other staff and students to chime in on their conversations and speak their mind about policy issues or concerns; however, there is no guarantee of higher university chairmen or administrators being present and these public meetings are only held on select days of the year and not on a consistent basis. Additionally, the university once had what it called an Educational Leadership Council, or ELC, a group delegated in 2015 which, as claimed on its website, was dedicated towards consulting "in a broader way on matters which have a substantial impact on the university." This council was also designed to form collaborative efforts between faculty and administrators on campus in

furthering the campus's values; however, they have not held a documented meeting since late 2021, and no other records of the ELC after 2021 exist. While the university has made efforts in an attempt to form trust and prevent disconnect, these have unfortunately faltered for a variety of reasons, whether that be infrequent meetings, inconsistent outside inclusion in briefings, or small meeting agendas that miss important criteria of concern. Thus, despite their existence and the benefit they may have provided, the disconnect between the university's bodies still exists.

It's important to know what benefits these routine meetings would provide to everyone involved in the university setting. Regularly discussing and putting forth the needs of other bodies has been shown to boost morale and lead to better, more effective solutions to long-standing issues. Last year at Iowa's Buena Vista University, a survey was conducted by university administrators that asked faculty if they were experiencing burnout on campus. This survey allowed for staff to share their thoughts on existing work conditions and administrators to create effective combats for these conditions once they had an understanding of the problem, which later led to the hiring of freshman and sophomore success coaches and lessened course-load requirements for faculty to ensure that professors and other academic staff weren't being overworked (Lee Gardner, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*). Saint Mary's College in California also brought on members of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges for assistance in decision-making and rebuilding dialogue among faculty and administrative bodies, doing so in the hopes that trust could be regained among them (Lee Gardner, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*).

In relation to trust, this communication is also essential in rebuilding said trust in campus leaders among students. The previously mentioned survey from the *Higher Education Studies* journal found that when students were in need of guidance or leadership on campus, those who

had more consistent contact with the student were the ones that students were more likely to come to for help because they were more identifiable as leaders for being in touch with them on a frequent basis (Stephanie Rizzo et al., Higher Education Studies). Conversely, less frequent contact may make students feel less heard about campus issues and more likely to blame campus administration for new issues that may arise. One anonymous student at the California State Polytechnic University in Pomona admitted to other students feeling such a way, saying that while he felt heard by the higher-ups, a large population of other students felt ignored by the administration. As such, they found it easy to blame the campus administrators when further issues were raised, even if they had no control over it (Melissa Ezarik, Inside Higher Education).

A large aspect of the lacking communication at hand today is that too often are these bodies, especially administrators, eager to mark themselves as their own separate groups when colleges are meant to work in unison. For effective work to be done and big goals to be achieved, college campuses can't work in this mindset. Concordia University mathematics professor Angela Walmsley has admitted as such, stating in 2016 that collaborative environments can't exist in places where university bodies group themselves as one individual body and adopt a "them and us" mentality, stating that "Communication is key when it comes to leadership," and "too often this important element isn't present" (Angela Walmsley, The Evollution). Essentially, effective and consistent communication amongst all members of a university is one of the most important things that can ensure a university's success and lasting. If this quality of communication doesn't exist, then it makes it harder for problems on campus grounds to be tackled, which leads to increased distrust among campus bodies and only further issues that lead to further tension in an endless cycle, which has unfortunately become of big presence in a span of different college spheres. These regular interventions being made available to everyone

involved would allow for this communication to be regained, which, if done correctly, could spark an upward cycle of more effective problem solving, increased trust, and greater success.

Of course, this solution and the disconnect problem it aims to solve may raise some concerns or questions that deserve to be addressed. Some may wonder as to if this disconnect is even an issue on some campuses at all. If the university is reporting a positive atmosphere on their grounds, then there isn't a problem to attend to, right? Unfortunately, that may not always be the case. Similar contradictions were found in a 2017 review by the *Journal of School Health* of an LA County university concerning the connection between campus climate and student experiences. Studies on the correlation made by both faculty and administrators claimed that there was no connection between the campus's environment and the outcome of a student's college experience; however, reports on a possible connection made by student bodies opposingly found large positive correlations between one's safety or climate on campus grounds and how they viewed their college tenure (Lauren Gase et al., *Journal of School Health*).

Colleges are often treated like businesses in the sense that maintaining good PR is essential, especially in attracting investors, sponsors, and donors, and as such, administrators may sometimes be willing to spin a story or study if it means the university still appears in good standing. To assume that issues such as these don't exist is, unfortunately, a surface-level assumption that only risks further increasing the disconnect between the parties involved.

Another question may be what this solution ultimately does for the administrators who run these universities. Sure, the solution of implementing regular multi-body meetings has a lot of rewarding benefits for educators and the ones being educated. However, there do exist multiple ways that administrators can reap the rewards from these conferences as well. As stated before, these meetings would allow for increased trust and respect for them as leaders among

students due to their increased presence in their college tenures. These would also allow for new perspectives and insight on potential campus-wide issues that administrators would be tasked to solve, which may make developing solutions to these issues much easier for the higher-ups to accomplish. But additionally, regularly speaking with members of campus faculty may eliminate any misconceptions or assumptions made between both sides that break their connections. It's often that faculty assume administrators are slacking off because of their lack of presence on campus or that the transition to administrator is easy, while administrators may have similar assumptions that faculty aren't doing their fair share of work or are obligated to work in the summer (Angela Walmsley, *The Evolution*); of course, none of these assumptions are based in fact on either side. Opening these communications among all bodies will bring the potential to remove these jumped-to conclusions and create the possibility of renewed collaboration, which "can only occur where there is mutual respect, openness, and friendliness among both faculty and administration" (Angela Walmsley, *The Evolution*).

Lastly, one could ask the question of how these meetings would create greater problem-solving efficiency if these tensions exist now. Of course, it is an impossibility to remove the disconnect among all parties overnight and get everyone on the exact same page. However, the university experience is meant to be one filled with a variety of different perspectives and outlooks, and as such, to solve prominent issues on campus grounds, these differing views and opinions need to be heard and acknowledged to create the best solution for everyone involved, no matter the differences in viewpoint present. Kevin Kruger, the president of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, has admitted as such, acknowledging that these barriers must be broken for diverging expressions and views to be effectively heard: "If we want a society that allows people to engage in differences in productive ways, we have to have that in

the university" (Melissa Ezarik, Inside Higher Education). Discrepancies and concerns about solutions such as this that address such a widespread problem are bound to exist, but ultimately, these increased chances for communication and understanding among all parties are essential to boost the college setting for everyone involved.

Dialogue is one of the most essential ingredients to create a fulfilling university experience for all involved, no matter where one ranks in the educational chain. In fact, one of the University of Dayton's pledges to abide by is the *Commitment to Community*, which requires students at UD to be open to different perspectives, eliminate judgment of those with differing takes on issues or topics, and be willing to speak their mind on other topics or issues which may arise. Whenever disconnect arises in the college setting, if managed ineffectively, it can quickly create internal tensions that prevent problems from being communicated or addressed effectively. Unfortunately, increasing cases of university administrators becoming either engrossed in their own interests or lessening talks with lower-ranking faculty and student bodies have, in turn, not only led to butting heads among all parties, but also further internal issues which could have been avoided if communication had been made. The implementation of regular multi-body meetings, while simple in concept, is an essential tool to reestablishing dialogue in the university setting, building trust and respect across all bodies, and efficiently solving university issues. Even though effective university communication seems to be fading away, it can be and should be reclaimed by doing a rather simple thing: opening the door to let communication back in.

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